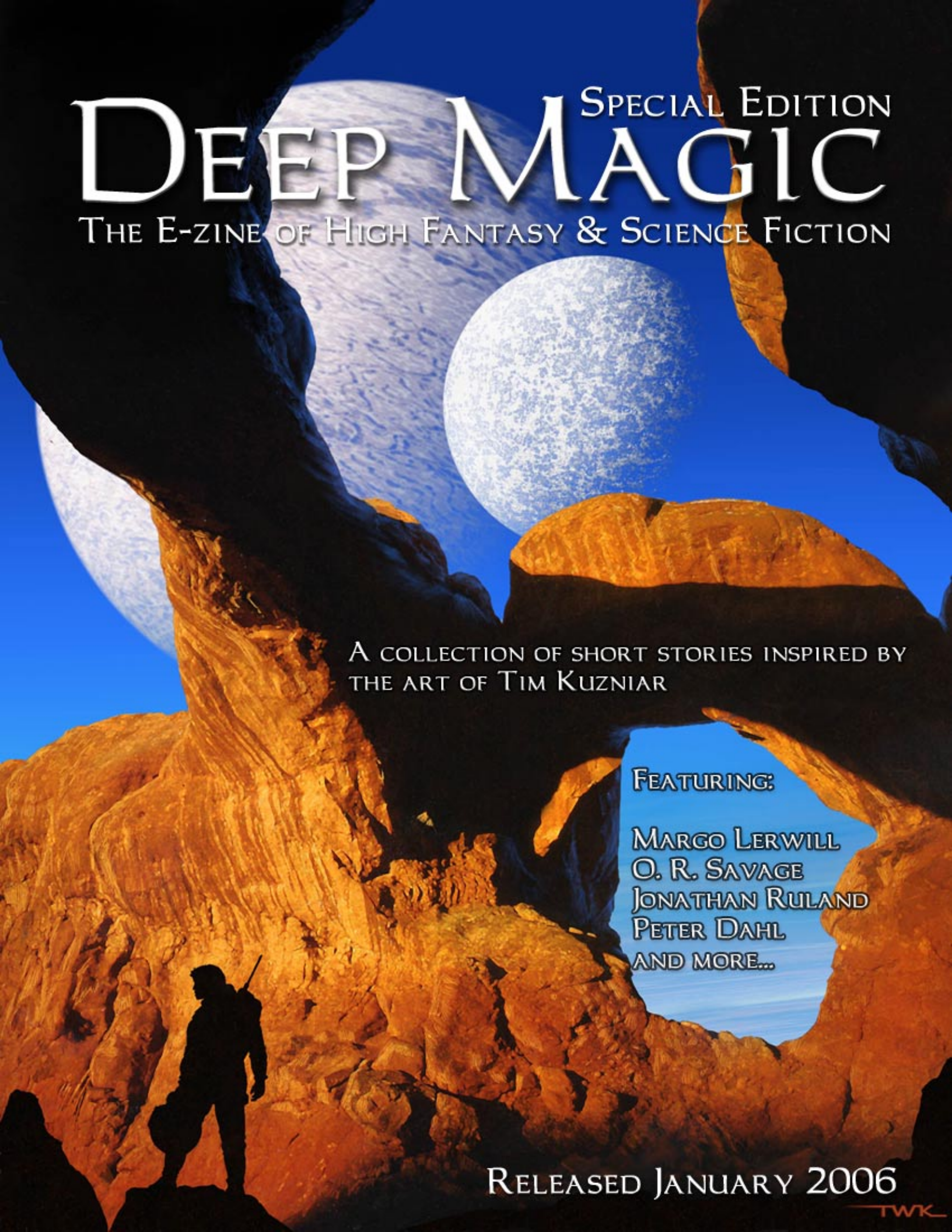
Special Edition
Deep Magic
The E-zine of High Fantasy & Science Fiction
A collection of short stories inspired by the art of Tim Kuzniar
Featuring:
Margo Lerwill
O. R. Savage
Jonathan Ruland
Peter Dahl
and more...
Released January 2006
TWK

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Cover: "*Explorer*" by Tim Kuzniar

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This special issue of Deep Magic was inspired by the writing challenge contest sponsored by Deep Magic in July 2005. Many of the stories from our staff were not published in full, so I compiled all their stories in this issue. In addition, I invited other authors to contribute, and they graciously accepted. Their stories are included for your enjoyment. The contest winner, written by A. M. Stickel, is reprinted, as well. My thanks to all who contributed to this special edition of Deep Magic. I hope this leads to more projects like this one in the future.

Note from the Editor

When Mike Loos first pitched the idea of a writing challenge contest to the Deep Magic staff, I was excited. Our challenges are always fun for me to read, but when you throw a prize into the mix, things are bound to get interesting. Turns out, that was just the start. Some of the staff wanted to participate, but since it wasn't fair to include staff in the contest, we had a separate entry that awarded nothing more than bragging rights. To my delight, ten members of the Deep Magic staff submitted the first part of a story.

That's when the idea for this special issue of Deep Magic came to me. I knew that we would only be publishing the completed version of three of the stories from our staff members, but I wanted to read them all. So I hatched this plot to guilt all the others to send me the final version of their stories. Nearly all of them complied. Interestingly, Mike Loos was unable to complete his story, for which I will harass him endlessly.

That wasn't enough for me, though. I decided to go outside of the contest and directly solicit stories from some of the authors we've published in Deep Magic in the past. These are authors whose work I have always enjoyed. To my surprise, all those I heard back from were excited to take part, and those that couldn't participate due to time constraints were happy to be invited. This is what being an editor is all about, and this is why I wanted to publish Deep Magic to begin with.

So not only do I offer stories from our staff members (including reprints of the three you've already read), but I offer stories from Jonathan Ruland, O. R. Savage, Margo Lerwill, and Peter Dahl. I have also included Anne Stickel's story, which won the contest among the readers' entries. All the stories are inspired by Tim Kuzniar's *Explorer*, which he was kind enough to let me re-use for this special issue.

It is my hope that this is the first of many special issues that I am able to put together for you. As editor of Deep Magic, it has always been my goal and desire to provide quality fantasy and science fiction. Four years of Deep Magic has certainly provided this, but this issue is my chance to offer a bonus. I hope you enjoy.

Sincerely,

Jeremy Whitted
Chief Editor
Deep Magic

Paying for Redemption

By Amy R. Butler

It was so very *wet*.

Yurrel felt like he was drowning. The moisture in the air was so thick, and his air filter had broken several leagues behind. He had learned to adapt, after several terrifying hours learning by experience that the atmospheric water wouldn't drown him at all, just make breathing suffocatingly difficult.

He shouldn't have been able to breathe the wet air at all, but he had been born that way. Parents terribly disappointed. Parents of a people who ate rock and drank fire, or that's what the wet people said. But he was visiting this wet planet and these wet people for relief. He hoped to find it, somewhere out of sight in the power of the sun.

Yurrel felt a droplet of sweat pucker on his forehead, and he hastily wiped it away with a cloth. He wondered idly what it would be like to bathe in water. The quiet, smooth coolness surrounding the body, embracing… he shoved the thought away. Freezing coldness, fluidity that clung to the body and left traces even after the victim had climbed free. Blue death.

Yurrel scampered down a steep sand dune, the momentum nearly smashing him into a rock. He took a breath, shoved off, and kept going. At the top of the rock he paused, his eyes looking for the best direction to go.

A movement made his throat catch, a raspy sound escaping as terror sparked every nerve. The creatures—no. No, he was safe. It was one of the wet people. Yurrel relaxed. He was surprised for a moment that one of the wet people was this far out in the desolation; there were no settlements anywhere near, and the ground couldn't support any nomadic bands.

While his curiosity left him standing, trusting, in plain sight and shot, the wanderer looked up, shaded his eyes against the sun, and then thrust his hand up in the common greeting of the world.

Yurrel hesitated. It didn't seem right, a wet person this far from water. Still, he raised his hand slowly, and the little man resumed his walk, but with more purpose, toward where Yurrel stood.

Yurrel watched, a bit amazed, as the little man with layered patch-work robes, striped pants, and a floppy pointed hat pushed his way through the sand to end up leaning against the little stone hill that Yurrel gazed down from.

"Hello!" the little man said with a smile on his face.

Yurrel stared at him in silence. The wet man's smile was starting to disappear before Yurrel answered in his own language.

The wet man quickly switched his dialect to match. "Ohhh, a Sepsterian. What a treat! Truly, truly. Ah, but I've forgotten my pleasantries. They call me Tymah."

"Yurrel," he gave up reluctantly. The wet man was so energetic for one with little visible water. Yurrel didn't even see a lone canteen.

"What a pleasure," Tymah said. "But a Sepsterian. What are you doing all the way out here?"

"I could ask you the same."

"Oh, of course. What is a 'wet person' doing out this far into the desolation?" Tymah smiled indulgently. "It is, unfortunately, a religious compulsion. No one comes out here unless they have religious reason or they want to die."

He smiled. Yurrel thought it odd.

"Religious orders on my planet are very radical," Yurrel said cautiously. "Is it the same on your planet?"

"Oh, no," Tymah said. "They're all quite pleasant."

"They just make strange demands."

"Don't they all?"

They stood there for a minute in uncomfortable silence, like faint acquaintances who stopped to exchange pleasantries, then were unsure of what to say or do. Tymah still smiled demurely. Yurrel shifted his pack.

"I have to continue," Yurrel said.

"Of course." Tymah blinked. "Might I join you?"

Yurrel tried to get a clear view of his face, but the top half was hidden in the shadow of his hat brim. "How do you know where I am going?"

"Aren't we all going toward the same place in this desolation?" When Yurrel didn't reply, Tymah made a suggestion. "You're headed for the Oracle."

"Yes," Yurrel said. "That's true."

"Well, then, you should be grateful I found you. You're veering to the west. In a couple of hours, you'd have been lost beyond hope."

Tymah brandished a thin, specter-like wand and started to march off. He glanced over his shoulder, the wide brim of his hat flopping about. "This way, Yurrel! You'll never get there if you keep that pace."

Brushing aside his surprise, Yurrel caught up with Tymah and walked beside him.

"The walk is long," Tymah said. "Tell me the news of your home world! Though we can see your star so brightly in the sky, news from Sepster is very scant. My people are fascinated by you."

There was a reason for that. Sepster was a dim planet for all its heat and light. Even most Sepsterians only heard rumors of what their ruling party plotted and schemed, but Yurrel knew more now, oh so much more, understood why contact was limited, felt a wince when he thought of those shadowy corridors where he had learned everything he needed to prepare himself for this trip. It was dark, but his need for redemption was too great to refuse the rulers' request.

"We continue much as we have since we withdrew from the Old War." The sun beat mercilessly. Yurrel enjoyed it, but he was surprised that his companion seemed so comfortable in his heavy outfit.

"And you, are you of this world?" Yurrel asked.

"Originally, yes," Tymah said. "I left when I was young and have traveled much since then. I had a thirst for—religious redemption, you might say."

Yurrel stopped, his heels sinking into the sand. Tymah turned to face him, a mild

expression on his face, not one entirely pleasant anymore. They stood in the middle of a sand valley, low and sinking, surrounded by dunes, and by the light of the sun and the moons, Yurrel understood that their meeting was not a coincidence.

"I have felt a need for redemption, too," Yurrel said slowly. He was uncertain whether to trust this Tymah, this wet man. Their meeting was not in the plans. There were many who would oppose the rulers' plans, but out in this desolation with no one else around, he had no choice but to trust Tymah.

"I need redemption for my own failure," Yurrel said. "For what I have been ridiculed and shamed for my entire life. I was told if I obeyed my leaders, my genetic inadequacy would be forgiven."

Tymah didn't look at all impressed or surprised.

"I knew this," he said calmly.

Yurrel stared at him, stunned. "You did?"

"Well, of course, of course," Tymah repeated, muttering to himself almost. "Why, I was sent to stop you. You must be stopped, you understand that."

As Yurrel stared and began to shout his protests, Tymah lifted his arms toward the heavens, his wand glowing at one end. The moons turned deep blue; lightning forked from clear skies. Cracks and peals louder than thunder split Yurrel's eardrums. He scrambled away from Tymah, fumbling for something in his pack that might be used as a weapon. The sands began to jump then, betraying Yurrel's feet, and soon he felt himself slipping, feet unable to find a purchase, and the sand swallowed Yurrel, and he wondered if this was what it felt like to drown.

Yurrel's hands floundered not through sand but open air as he felt himself falling, falling down into darkness, a rush of air around his ears, sand particles bouncing off his skin, and he landed with a grating, harsh thump that sent burning flames shooting up through his body. Sand continued to rain on him as he choked, unable to gain his breath; he stretched out, trying to pull himself away from the piling mound, dragging himself along the rocky, uneven floor, still in the darkness where he couldn't see-

"Ahhghh!"

Yurrel's hand felt like it had frozen and shattered, pain lacerating fingertips to wrist. He pulled it back, shaking, rubbing it along his clothes. He rolled onto it, pressing it against the floor as he squeezed his eyes shut. Tears would be even worse, the freezing burn in his eyes. Instead he screamed again. He breathed heavily, trying to concentrate on the sound of the falling sand.

When the pain had subsided to a dull numbness, Yurrel forced himself into a sitting position, his burnt hand hugged to his chest. He fumbled in his pack, pulling out a lantern and flipping it on. A thin streak of dark blue glimmered before him. Yurrel calmed a frightened lurch of his stomach. Most of his people would have died from simply dipping their hand into the water. Many would have fainted from the mere sight of the thin reservoir. Yurrel started to feel his head spin from the moisture, and he jumped to his feet, knowing that he had to escape the water's reach.

Yurrel frantically swung his lantern about. He could see no escape. Sand still poured from the hole in the ceiling, at least five times his height. There were no outlets on this side of the gulf, just a smooth, round wall. But off across the water, he could make out the shadows of more than a few crannies in the walls, nooks that seemed to lead into the darkness of safety. Fearfully, he swept the light around the edge of the reservoir. It was too wide to make in a jump, but if the edges, the ones near the wall, were shallow… They looked it in the light of the lantern, and

Yurrel hoped it wasn't just a trick of the light.

His nostrils were starting to narrow. Yurrel, with hardly a second thought, took off at a sprint, and aimed for the edge of the lake, praying to whatever deity they pledged to and whatever demon he was pursuing. When the water clasped around his feet and snaked up his ankles, he stumbled against the wall of the cavern, impacting and rebounding so that he fell, feet still floundering in the extending grip of the water. He shrieked and pulled himself forward, clawing the floor, lower body convulsing with the burns.

He ignored the shudderings, heaving his body along by his arms, his fingers bleeding as he grasped and pulled, grasped and pulled, the light from the lantern bouncing wildly with his movements. He reached a tunnel entrance and pulled himself through, the gentle downward slope of the floor allowing him to slide down, to rest, to feel the full force of the assault on his feet.

When the floor finally evened out, he paused for a minute, allowed himself a moment of rest, and gathered together his remaining strength to stand.

Guilty. He should feel guilty for that. Guilty for touching the water, guilty for the way his body was now relaxing, guilty for surviving. He was a misfit, unacceptable, disowned. There was nothing but shame in what had just happened. And he felt shame, shame and…

Yurrel readjusted his pack and held the lantern high. It was a straight tunnel as far as he could see, walls smooth and ceiling high. Yurrel started on, limping, each step flaring up in his feet.

Tymah. Who was he? What did he know of Yurrel's mission and the ruling party? Visions flashed through Yurrel's mind again, ones the ruling party had inserted with words of redemption and freedom, pictures of words during yellow in heat and green and blue fading from the land, Sepsterian architecture rising on the dead as the surplus population discovered more worlds like their own. If anyone outside of Sepster found out about this, they would want to stop it, of course.

There was a turn up ahead. Yurrel slowed down, leaned against the wall as he peered around the corner, shining the light around. The tunnel opened up into another cavern, this one much larger than the first and housing a great stone façade, the front of a long, low, rounded building with a tall oval opening. It was plain, unadorned, and Yurrel knew at once it was the Oracle.

The yawning door flickered with orange light, and Yurrel dropped his lantern as he ran for it. He could feel the heat washing over his body, cleansing away the last claws of moisture, burning in a new way, sparks all along his body. He made a jerky stop in the entrance, holding and breathing the sulfur. So close, the taste of redemption.

Yurrel stepped inside. There was a low wall of fire breaching the floor twenty paces ahead; behind that, an intricate stone monument, creatures eating themselves up with flame and tooth. In front of the fire there stood a pedestal, simple in contrast to the statue behind the fire. Yurrel walked forward, the heat breezing on his face, stepped up to the pedestal and looked down. A small wooden bowl, filled almost to the brim. Yurrel lifted it.

Drink, they had told him. Whatever is in it, lift it from the pedestal, press it to your lips, and drink. It will awaken the power of Sepster. An empire that will span the galaxy.

"I'm told it doesn't taste very good."

Yurrel almost dropped the bowl. Instead, he turned slowly and faced Tymah, a black shadow in the yawning entrance.

"Unlucky, you not falling into the water," Tymah said. His wand was extended. "If you hadn't tried to escape then, you would have had a straight fall, and you wouldn't be tempted to

go through with this."

"Unlucky," Yurrel repeated. "Unlucky for you."

"For many people."

Drink it, Yurrel urged himself. Quickly. Once you start, he can't stop it, no one can.

"A religious compulsion, was it?"

"The sanctity of life is a religious compulsion," Tyman said. "One based on your own world."

Yurrel blanked, all the plans in his mind grinding to a stop. "On Sepster?"

"Not everyone agrees with the ruling party's designs," Tyman said softly. "You could be accepted without this construed redemption."

Yurrel looked down into the bowl, the liquid shivering there. "No. There is no redemption outside the ruling party. There is no religion outside the ruling party."

Tymah lowered his wand. "Think, Yurrel," he urged. "This is forced, fake. The rulers have no more power to grant you redemption than water or fire does. This is not real."

But who would give him redemption? Yurrel felt like a brilliant flash of light went through his mind, clearing it completely, wiping away the clouds of deceit and carefully construed words. He knew the way to redemption.

He drank.

He thought he heard Tymah shouting, but he had fallen to his knees, the bowl clattering away. There was a terrifying shattering sound, screaming, roaring. But he could hear the roar through his veins more. It snapped and cracked, bursting through his body, erupting in lines, crisscrossing his chest, his arms, his head. He screamed too, and a gurgle of ice rose in his throat. A sudden burst of heat burned away the squeezing hands of cold.

He looked up, tears evaporating off his face. His body smoldered, from water and fire. He could hear – silence. And in the still rising steam, he could see four gaping holes, broken right through the stone, the wet planet's sun shining down mercilessly to illuminate the cavern. Yurrel turned to look at the once beautiful monument. Nothing remained except the jagged bottom.

He turned the other way. Among the stillness of the rock fragments and boulders he could see movement. He pushed himself to all fours and crawled forward, the shards digging into his skin.

When he reached Tymah, Yurrel saw that he was broken, bleeding, and melted. He was surprised he was still taking breath. Tymah shuddered and sobbed, rasping for breath as he flailed under a large chunk of the ceiling. When he saw Yurrel, Tymah's face contorted.

"Could have been… different."

Different? Yurrel sat back. He was different, ridiculed, disgraced. But… the whispering hints Tymah had given him trailed through his mind. There were people of his world who would have accepted him, as he was? There couldn't have been; the ruling party reigned over all hearts and minds.

"Need help," Tymah choked.

Yurrel leaned forward again, putting his hands on the boulder that was pinning Tymah, but Tymah's cry stopped him.

"Not me!" Tymah stilled, focusing his energy on panting for breath. "Others."

Yurrel shook his head. "I can't help. They will void my absolution."

Tymah turned his head, and Yurrel was surprised by the intensity of his stare.

"Do you," Tymah whispered. "Feel it?"

Yurrel was puzzled for a minute. Feel what? And he realized abruptly that no, he didn't feel it. He didn't feel any different. He still felt the guilt, the shame, that there had been no

redemption. His return to Sepster would not bring glory or fame or acceptance.

Yurrel started to cry. His eyes burned, his face tingled, but he couldn't stop the tears.

"Real shame," Tymah croaked.

Yurrel stared down at him, this wet prophet, and tried to stifle the urge to smash his head in with a rock. He wanted to believe the lie. He wanted Tymah to stop mumbling so he could force himself to ignore the guilt.

"Save them," Tymah said. He managed to lift his hand from the ground. His wand was still clutched in his charred fingers. Yurrel grasped it and pulled it free. Tymah's face contorted again.

"Redemption," he cried, one last gasp, and fell silent and still.

Yurrel sat still too, brushing his fingertips along the wand. His mind was numb, his body tortured. Who on Sepster would love him when he returned? No one. He pushed himself up from the ground and staggered toward the mouth of the Oracle.

He no longer needed genetic redemption. He had never needed it. But the fool he had been! Now he truly needed it, and he had no knowledge of how to get it.

Yurrel stopped on the threshold of the Oracle and spat on the stone.

The End

A Bit of Karma

By Nicole Sherene Goethals

She gripped the nearest piece of furniture, an old hand-me-down dresser given to her family by some aunt or uncle when she was a baby. She mentally envisioned her fingernails peeling through the varnish as she tried to focus her energy inward. Even she feared her own anger.

"How could you, Steven?" Her words were muttered through clenched teeth, and her grip on the dresser became painful.

"I'm only doing what's best for you, Melanie. He's no good."

She spun around to glare viciously into his eyes. "And what right do you have to decide who's right for me? Just who the hell do you think you are?"

His eyes narrowed as he took in her harsh words. "I was doing you a favor, lil' sis. See if I do any more for you."

"I didn't ask for your help, Steven!" She raised her arms, hands clenched tightly into fists. "I really liked this one. He *meant* something to me. Can't you understand that?"

"All I understand, Melanie, is that he's trash, and no good for you!" Her brother turned to leave the room, his decision final.

How dare he call Chance trash? And before she could retract it, the thought was formed inside her mind. It was a simple thought, rash, a single sentence.

I wish you were dead.

Her hand leapt to her mouth, as if she had spoken the thought out loud. Steven hadn't noticed. His back was turned as he walked down the hallway toward his room.

Then the scene shifted to the next afternoon as she watched in horror as the drunk driver blatantly disregarded the red light and screeched through the crosswalk. Steven didn't notice the car in time. He was looking straight at her.

She screamed.

* * *

Even after three weeks in the desert, it still amazed Melanie how cold it could be after dark. She possessed a thin, shawl-type blanket and a pillow, but she never seemed to be warm enough. She'd considered sleeping in the cave during the day, when it was warm. However, her body could never quite adjust to sleeping during that time. So, during the days she melted, and at night she froze.

She'd been lucky enough to find a cave dwelling with an underground spring. She hadn't

settled far from civilization, but far enough to not be a danger to anyone. At least, not to anyone else.

When the moon was full, Melanie was a danger even to herself. Those days were long and strenuous. It's amazing how difficult it can be to control one's thoughts over such an extended period of time, especially in a place with no distractions. But she didn't trust herself around people.

Not anymore.

She glanced up at the setting sun and looked despairingly on the two moons. She remembered trying to convince her brother that there was a second moon only she could see. The rest of the family would laugh, but not Steven.

"I believe in you, Melanie."

It'd been almost three months since that car had hit him. And it was her fault. No judge in the country would be able to convict her for his murder, but she knew the truth.

In a girl like Melanie, who sees a second moon no one else can find, one stray thought can change a person's life.

Or, in Steven's case, end it forever.

She planned her trips to town with care. She never acquired supplies during a full moon. And she would hum the entire time she visited.

The local townspeople liked to talk about the crazy young girl who lived alone in the desert and always hummed to herself. She didn't care. Let them think she was insane. Maybe they would leave her alone.

* * *

Melanie writhed in her sleep, replaying the same moment over and over. Her brother was standing there and smiling. He had something to say to her, but she'd only just exited the store, and he was on the other side of the street.

It'd been a good day. She'd gone shopping to get over losing Chance. She didn't know what her brother had told the boy, but he wouldn't accept her calls and walked the other way when she spotted him. It hurt. She had really liked Chance, and as much as she tried to get Steven to confess what was so wrong about him, her older brother was tight-lipped.

But she was done being mad. She knew she needed to be more careful with her emotions. They tended to act themselves out. Like the time Susan Mooley had made fun of her ponytails in 5th grade. Melanie had wanted nothing more than for Susan to have the worst haircut ever. She'd come to school the next day completely bald. No one could explain the hair loss, and it eventually grew back, but that was the day Melanie started paying attention to her thoughts.

Steven took his first steps onto the crosswalk, heading straight toward her. He seemed so intent, and he was smiling. What news could he be bringing that would make him so happy? she wondered.

She sensed the movement from the corner of her eye. Her brother was a third of the way across the street. He never even saw it coming.

When the car made contact, Steven flew through the air and landed in the nearby intersection. Cars screeched to avoid hitting the boy lying in the middle of the road. Melanie wanted to turn her head. She didn't want to see any of this.

One of the cars failed to stop in time. Tears poured down her face as she watched the driver roll over his midsection.

"Stop. Stop. Please stop." She cried, but she knew the help she sought wouldn't come and

tomorrow night she'd relive the horror again.

She sank to her knees, placed her face in her hands and sobbed. She cried for her brother's life, torn from him too early. And she cried for having such a terrible power. The power to destroy someone she loved with a single thought.

As her sobbing became more controllable, she realized she was still in her dream. "How unusual." She always awakened once she began to cry.

Curious, she looked up at the scene around her. Everything had stopped. Steven lay there, underneath the car that crushed him. No one moved, not a single sound was uttered.

"What's going on?"

She sensed movement and looked in the direction of the sidewalk on the other side of the intersection. Standing there was a man, dressed in dark clothing and what seemed to be a long tweed trenchcoat. There was something different about him.

Then she noticed it. He was staring straight at her. Even from this distance she could feel his gaze burning into her. And he was smoking. She watched as his hand moved back and forth, connecting the cigarette to his lips and blowing out the smoke. Had she ever noticed him before? She didn't recall seeing him in her other nightmares.

"Who are you?" she yelled across the street.

He began to laugh.

* * *

An old man had once approached her in the mall. She'd been sitting quietly on a bench outside a clothing store, waiting on her mother to finish up. Her mom purchased an ice cream cone to indulge Melanie's patience. All she had to do was sit and wait, and she would get ice cream. If she was really good, and didn't complain, mom would let her choose a movie at the video store on the way home. Her brother never had the patience for this sort of thing and would spend Saturdays with their father. But Melanie didn't mind. Not only did she get a full day of her mother's undivided attention, she also got things like ice cream cones and movie rentals.

As she sat and enjoyed her double scoop of pink bubble gum ice cream, filling her mouth to the brim with tiny pink Chiclets, she noticed a little girl being dragged through one of the other stores. She'd looked so unhappy, being forcibly pulled along at the elbow by her mother. At that moment, Melanie wanted nothing more than to share her ice cream with that little girl.

After about five minutes, the two of them exited the store, and to Melanie's amazement, the child returned carrying an ice cream of her own. It was only one scoop and looked like plain vanilla, but the smile on the girl's face was enormous.

"That's an impressive thing you did there."

She hadn't even noticed that a gray-haired gentleman sat down beside her.

"I'm not supposed to talk to strangers." She looked into the store after her mother, but couldn't find her.

"Don't worry, child. I won't harm you. Just wondered if you knew what just happened over there?" He tilted his head in the direction of the other little girl.

"All I know is that girl looked really unhappy, and then her mom bought her some ice cream."

He nodded and his fingered brushed over the tips of an equally graying moustache. "You didn't happen to think about that girl having an ice cream of her own, did you?"

It sounded vaguely like she was in trouble for something so she responded defensively. "No, sir! I just thought it would be nice to share mine with her."

"You're a special little girl. Did you know that?"

Before she could think of a response, her mother called after her. Melanie rushed up and grabbed her mom's hand.

* * *

The man in the coat stayed in Melanie's thoughts long after she woke. Her dream specifically pointed in his direction, and she wasn't certain what to make of it. She didn't recognize him, and for all the sense of maliciousness she carried with her, she'd no idea what any of it meant. And with little to do during the day but think, he remained in her thoughts.

The full moon, or moons if she dared call them such, was a week off, and too much thinking was dangerous for her. So, she planned a trip to town. She'd made some new bracelets to drop off at the visitors center at the edge of the town. Focusing on the humming would take her mind off her new problem and keep her occupied. Besides, she needed to see if any of her jewelry had sold in the last couple weeks.

She'd fashioned a walking staff out of a nearby tree, if you could call it that. The struggling thing was no match for the dry desert, and Melanie hadn't felt bad for putting it to good use. The rocks could be tricky, and she didn't like to think about obtaining an injury in such a remote place with no one to care whether she lived or died.

The walk to the center was long and boring, just like the rest of her recent existence. She began the humming early, just to keep the internal voices silenced. She now understood why people went insane when solitarily confined. No noise allowed the mind to run rampant, and that wasn't good for anyone, not without a way to vent all that pent-up energy.

The locals weren't an enterprising bunch, so they didn't surprise her with their usual reactions to her presence. After picking up her meager earnings, she headed further into town to purchase some basic supplies.

Borrengo Springs only had the one mall, but it was enough to appease Melanie for a while. Nothing like the malls back in San Diego, it was more of a shopping center than an actual mall. She took her time glancing at items she could ill afford anymore. She spent a longer amount of time perusing beads and similar material to trigger ideas for future jewelry, and profits.

As she left a familiar Native American store, she noticed that the crowd was thicker than normal. Nothing to get excited about, but definitely more traffic than usual. Eager to put distance between herself and so many innocent people, Melanie shifted her belongings and decided to head back.

She crossed the street and headed back toward the visitors center. As she started, those annoying hairs at the back of her neck prickled. Someone else was staring at her, no doubt. Trying to figure out her story, what she wanted, where she lived. Those too interested in her always made her nervous. Melanie didn't want to appease anyone's curiosity, only to get back to the quiet of her new home.

When the feeling didn't pass, she paused and casually looked over her shoulder. She spotted many shoppers going about their own business, enjoying their Saturday afternoon. About the time she nearly gave the notion up to paranoia, she spotted him. There he was, leaning against the wall, smoking his cigarette and staring right at her. It was the man from her dream! The desert weather was warm, nearly 98 degrees, and she noticed he was carrying his trenchcoat instead of wearing it. But there was no doubt to Melanie that this was the same guy.

She didn't know why this man was in her dreams or why he seemed to be following her, but she didn't want him to have an open invitation to her secluded part of the desert. She

worried over the need to defend herself in such an isolated area. There would be no help if she needed it.

Deciding to confront the man seemed better than showing him the way to her cave, so she turned back the way she came. Before she could even cross the street, however, the man vanished. Melanie spent the better part of two hours wandering around the mall hoping to find him, but failed.

Sensing the day's light fading, she decided to head back. It would take her two hours to get there and she was already tired. Getting lost in the desert at night was not her idea of a good time, either.

* * *

On the walk home, she'd been compelled to glance behind her periodically but spotted no movement on her trek back into the desert mountains. After a couple of hours inside the cave without incident, her heartbeat finally resumed a normal beat, and she felt relaxed enough to sleep for the night. She avoided thinking about the man and the mall as she put away her supplies and prepared for bed. She worried that her fear might project itself in some way onto this man, and until she found out what his intentions were, she had no right altering the balance in his life. While she was not entirely certain what her abilities were or from where they came, her past taught her to be weary of thinking about any particular person for too long.

Her unease didn't entirely pass as she laid her head down for the night, but exhaustion got the better of her and she slipped into sleep quickly.

I know what you are….

Melanie looked around for the voice's owner, but the darkness of a cloudy desert night prohibited her from seeing his face.

Her instincts told her it was only a dream. A moment ago she'd lain down to sleep, but now she was standing outside her cave glancing into nothing.

Do you know what you are?

She spun around, unable to pinpoint a direction. The voice seemed to come from above her, from the sky itself.

"No, no I don't." She answered honestly, half hoping the mysterious man trying to speak to her could answer long buried questions.

Then why do you hide?

"I'm a danger to others."

Only those who displease you.

"Isn't that enough?"

You can be a blessing to others. Many have chosen that path.

"It's too risky. The good I do doesn't justify what I do in anger."

The man did not reply. Melanie stood silently for several minutes, wondering what to do next. The desert wind whipped the black curls around her ears, disturbing more than her hair. Time dragged on. Desperate, she yelled at the sky, tempting the voice to come back.

"I never asked for this!" Her scream echoed off the nearby rocks, repeating her cry for help.

Softly, she added, "I don't know what to do."

The wind whispered around her as it chilled her flesh.

I can relieve you of your burden.

* * *

Melanie woke up gasping. Fear crept in and took root. She tried to rationalize it. Nothing in the dream was particularly frightening. The voice had not threatened her. But she did not trust it. She wanted answers, but at the same time she was afraid to ask the questions.

The first rays of the morning stretched across her legs. She considering going down to the spring and taking a bath, but she wasn't quite ready to move yet.

What was wrong with her? Why couldn't she just be like everyone else? Melanie thought she'd let these questions go, but now they seemed to be rising to the surface once more. Excluding the brief encounter with the old man in the mall as a child, no one knew what she was capable of. She wished that old man would show up now. Maybe he knew how to stop it, or control it. Maybe he could explain her dreams and the man from town.

Only Steven knew her secret. He called it karma. At times her brother would call her lucky.

"You never know whether it's going to be good or bad, but there's always luck."

He had winked at her when he said it, as if they shared a private joke.

If it was a joke, it had a terrible punchline. Melanie's karmic powers cost Steven his life. Why had she been given such a horrible gift? And what was she to do with it? Hiding alone in the desert for the next sixty years or so did not sound promising.

She wasn't even twenty years old yet, not for a few months. Her life ended on the same day as Steven's because she'd discovered the threat she posed to other people. No little inconvenience of bad luck—she had caused his death.

And now someone was looking for her. Someone capable of entering her dreams. Maybe someone like her. Or maybe someone wanted to use her powers instead?

She couldn't allow anyone to manipulate her that way.

Her questions would go unanswered.

Frustrated, she lifted her cover from her legs and began gathering the items needed to take her bath. It was not until she nearly passed through the entrance to the back cavern that her peripheral vision halted her.

Melanie turned to her right to look toward the main entrance of the cave. There, many yards ahead of her, tucked into the closest shadow to the archway, was a mound. She'd already put away her supplies. Besides, she knew she wouldn't have left them so close to the opening of the cave.

Apprehensive, she edged forward. There were not many large animals in the Mojave Desert, but something may have sought shelter in her new home. Coyote howls kept her awake the first few nights in this new habitat. She felt ill prepared to take on a coyote, having made no weapons.

Idiot, she thought. *Now you are trapped in a cave with a wild animal and nothing but beads to ward him off!*

She scraped her feet along the ground, careful to keep her distance. The noise of her footsteps increased as Melanie tested to see if the creature would wake and move. She was in no hurry to rouse it, but she couldn't just sit back and wait for it to move.

Once she got closer to the body, she began to take notice of what kind of animal it was. It was a bird of some sort. There were clawed feet and dark feathers, with small white streaks. She approached from the back and could not see its head, but she saw enough of it to know it was ugly.

Then she noticed the trail of blood leading from the bird to the wall of the cave.

Dead then. She almost sighed in relief. *Or dying,* she reminded herself.

She tilted her head slightly and followed the blood trail. Her instincts pleaded at her not to look, but her curiosity was strong. The blood trailed not only to the wall, but down it as well.

And there, written in what was left of the vulture at her feet, was a message.

I know what you are.

* * *

She gathered her things quickly. She did not have much. The walk back into town became slow and agonizing. The natural sounds of the desert were all eerie to her today. Every rock had a mystery behind it, something to be feared. Someone had invaded her home. He'd tried to frighten her, and she was woman enough to admit that it worked. No longer able to justify living alone in the middle of nowhere, she headed for the nearest shelter she could find, the Borrengo Springs Visitors Center.

The woman who managed the center had offered Melanie assistance before, allowing her to sell the jewelry she made. Ms. Valerne pleaded for Melanie to stay with her on occasion. She worried over Melanie's desire to be alone in such a vast and dangerous place.

Now Melanie needed to take the kind woman up on her offer. At least until she figured out what was going on and what she was going to do about it.

She tried to stay out of the way, and thought about the Valernes as little as possible. She hoped to avoid using her powers in any way. The couple exuded kindness and Melanie appreciated their help.

Her dilemma provided a variety of options, but none of them were safe. She could go back to the desert, or some other remote place, but not until something was done about her new stalker and her dreams. She could stay in Borrengo Springs, but what was the point of coming way out here just to put a different group of people in danger? She could also return to San Diego, back to where she started. That, however, put not only the city's residents at risk, but also her family and friends. She'd already caused one death and was in no rush to repeat history.

The dreams returned a couple of days later. Only now she saw horrible things. People being kidnapped, raped, and murdered. Flashes of tortured faces and brief montages of death tormented her. Melanie tried to force her mind to awaken, but nothing worked. It was like watching someone's home movies in fast forward, only the images were terrifying. All the while, she could hear the strange man's laughter and his voice telling her that this is what her powers were capable of. That this was what they could be used for. To let her anger be free and to use in vengeance. His voice was calm and soothing, the only sanctuary in her nightmare, and she listened to him to block out the images.

I can teach you to use your power.

She tried to close her eyes, but couldn't block the barrage of imagery.

You can take back control of your life.

It hurt, the fact that this stranger knew her so well. It pained her that her desire was so obvious.

I can show you the path. You can be free!

She sank to her knees and sobbed, wishing to hold her head in her hands as the faces screamed their terror at her.

"LEAVE ME ALONE!" she screamed.

* * *

"I've just had the best luck since you came, Miss Melanie." Miss Valerne busied herself potting some plants for the backyard.

"You have?" Melanie tried to sound surprised, but knew she had inadvertently been the cause.

"Why, my thumb has never been so green. It's so difficult growing anything in this dry heat, but my poor little plants have been looking healthier since you showed up."

She laughed. "I really don't think I had much to do with that, Mrs. Valerne. I don't know a thing about plants."

The old woman reached across the kitchen counter and patted Melanie on the shoulder. "I never said you did. But I've never seen my plants looking so happy. It's a good sign."

Melanie just smiled and hoped Mrs. Valerne was right. She could use a little good luck.

"So, out of curiosity, you decided what you're gonna do now?" Mrs. Valerne slipped off her gardening gloves and strode towards the fridge.

"No, not yet. I'm still trying to figure some things out."

"Well, I worry about ya. Always moping around like you're carrying the world on your shoulders. And you being so young and all. You should move back to that big city, make some friends, and find a nice boy. Do things other girls your age do." She nodded sharply to punctuate her wisdom.

"I left all that behind. I don't know if I can face it again."

"Honey, I don't know what it is that's bothering you, but you just take your time. Decisions usually make themselves after awhile. Why don't you try to forget about it today? Tonight's the full moon, and George and I were gonna do some stargazing. You're welcome to join us." She patted Melanie's hand encouragingly.

Melanie had no intention of being near anyone during a full moon.

* * *

As soon as the sun set, Melanie excused herself to retire early. Mrs. Valerne looked disappointed, but she didn't question. Since Melanie had not been able to come up with a safe destination in time, she decided to go to sleep early enough that the effect of the moons would be diminished. The pressure of trying not to think during this time was more than Melanie wanted to deal with. And while she feared her dreams, she feared herself even more so.

In her sleep, she was flying. She spread her arms open wide and twirled through the wind. She felt free. Joy crept into a tiny corner of her soul, and she yelled with all her heart. It felt as if a huge weight lifted off of her, and she soared through the clouds.

Ecstatic, and at the same time weary of waking, Melanie cautiously surveyed her surroundings. The world she knew looked so different from up here. There were strange landscapes and varying climates. She approached a land of snow and ice and wondered at its beauty. Her pattern of flight altered, and she found herself coming closer to the snow.

She came toward the earth slowly, adjusting to the change easily. When she was low enough to make out the people below her, she spotted an ice skating rink. She heard laughter as people chatted and enjoyed an evening outside. She watched in wonder as they glided over the ice. *It's almost like flying*, she thought.

No one noticed her as she hovered over the scene, enraptured by the peace it brought.

She felt a tug and her body began to pull back towards the sky. That's when she noticed

the woman with the red hair. She was standing beside the pond, her scarf floating in the breeze. She looked directly at Melanie and smiled.

There are others.

Others? There were other people like her? The woman nodded and smiled. Melanie tried to fight the pull of her dream to drift back down to the frozen pond, but no amount of struggling changed her course.

She heard the woman's voice as the scene faded away.

We need you. Find us.

* * *

Melanie grasped her dream tightly when she woke up, willing it not to leave. She wanted to remember this one. The need to feel that level of freedom and peace, she craved it. Now that she'd experienced how wonderful she could truly feel, she was desperate not to let it go.

She remembered the lady in the blue snow jacket, her red hair dancing around her face. The woman's smile called out to her, and Melanie knew she had to find her.

A decision had made itself after all. No longer content to hide away, being regularly tormented by someone who knew more about her than she did, she now had a purpose.

She might not know how to control the powers given to her, but there was someone out there who did.

And there was also a man desperate to utilize Melanie's ignorance to his advantage. A man who inspired more fear in Melanie than her own ability to affect others. She knew he took great pleasure in using his karmic powers to intentionally torture other people. Innocent people who had no means to fight him. They would not even know which direction the attack came from. An accident here or a terrible tragedy there, he could work in secrecy with no evidence to tie him to the crime.

But Melanie knew just what he was capable of. And while she might not be able to stop him yet, she'd discovered there was someone out there who might have the answers Melanie needed.

She jumped out of bed and began to gather her simple belongings into a duffel bag. First stop, back home to San Diego to make things right with those she'd left behind.

And then north to her destiny.

The End

Stone and Sky

By Margo Lerwill

Jagged rock sliced boot leather and the blistered skin beneath. Sun baked exposed flesh an angry red. Wind chapped his lips and filled his dry mouth with the taste of sand. But he expected this. This was the Waste, and the Waste was his only salvation.

Better to huddle on hard stone, sleep on any flat leeward surface he could find, than lay in the thickest meadow grass. Better to wring precious drops of water from a hot wineskin than drink from the clearest lake. Better to be free, even if it meant struggling for each moment of life in a barren landscape of stone, than prostrate himself as a pawn before the spirits of a garden paradise.

So Deter thought when he rejected his calling to serve as priest for the spirit of the meadow land. But where could he flee? Where were the spirits not forever engaged in godly games of manipulation against one another, with men as pitiful tools? The forest had its spirits, as did the sea. But the Waste? It suited its name. No humans had lived there since the nomad raiders had been wiped out five years before. It supported the minimum of plant and animal life, little enough to strain even Deter's skill with nature after having grown up as a hunter and a guide. It was enough, though. It was sterile and lifeless. Better yet, it was godless, the last place where a man could take refuge and own himself.

* * *

On his sixth day in the Waste, Deter sat in a shard of contracting shade on a great belly of red stratified rock, his empty wineskin lying flat between his legs. In the swelling heat of the afternoon, he tried not to exert himself and to stay conscious. He knew he was getting weaker but had not seen game in the three days since his food ran out. Running his hand through the short locks of his damp hair, he lay back, just for a moment. Moments turned into hours, and the shadows harboring him marched away step-by-step, degree-by-degree.

The sharp call of a hawk woke Deter, and his arms automatically flailed out for the bow lying nearby on the rock. The motion upset his balance on the stone dome, and at once he was sliding, then rolling, down the great belly, bruising and clawing as he went. A black crevice yawned up at him, then swallowed him whole. Deter landed in sand with a breathless thud, and everything went dark.

* * *

She was watching him when he woke up, this painfully thin girl with her thick veil of auburn hair. She sat on her haunches with her sharp chin on her balled fists, impassive. He lay in a pool of light spilling from the crevice opening above.

He swallowed hard and tried to speak, but his mouth was so dry his voice was no more than sand running across sand.

"You need water?" she said, but didn't wait for him to struggle for the obvious answer. She sprang up, a swirl of light brown linen in the long sleeveless dress she wore. She helped him to his knees, then his feet. He felt as though every rib he had was broken, and wished she'd just brought him the water.

Water. The thought gave him the strength to hobble with her across the cool sand – it felt like silk through the holes in his boots. They were in a shady cavern, with holes in the cavern ceiling like skylights.

The tall lass – near his own height, but so thin, too thin – propped Deter against her boney hip and urged him around a natural pillar of rock. Beyond the broad pillar lay an underground lake.

So this is how the nomads survived here, he thought. Then he was on all fours, gulping water, submerging his blistered face.

"Thank you. Thank you." He rolled over to lie in the shallows. Paradise in the Wastes. He didn't even care when his stomach growled.

"You need food," she observed. "If you can still handle your bow, there's quite a large hawk nearby, the one you heard before. You'll need to be a good shot, though."

Deter leaned up on one elbow. "How did you know I have a bow? And how did you know about the hawk?"

"I saw you. I saw you when you came here. I saw you climbing all the rocks."

"You saw? Why didn't you help me?"

"I thought you were lost and would find your way out. But now it seems you're staying, so I'll help."

"*Now* you'll help?" Deter asked, incredulous. He knit his brow. "How is it you're out here? Where is your family? How do you live here?"

She shrugged. "Like everything lives here. Hour by hour. Day by day."

"You're alone?"

"There are no others like me, if that's what you mean."

"Were you left behind when the nomads were driven out?" he asked, and she nodded. So, a nomad girl. "Why didn't you go too?"

Now she smiled as though he'd made a joke. "I've always lived here. There's no other place for me. Now, if you're going to hunt that hawk . . ."

* * *

In retrospect he realized he fell in love with Petra the first moment he saw her in the sun. She was as stark as the Waste. It was her hair and her eyes. Her hair was the same sandy red he saw all around him; her eyes were the same blue above him: stone and sky.

Petra showed Deter the secrets of the Waste, where to find the plants that clung to hidden crevices, their roots coiled around the sandy soil blown there, sinking down…down…down to water secreted below. She taught him how to recognize the telltale signs of wild hares and other strange, plated game, all camouflaged in the color of the Waste. Because he had been a hunter of

the meadows and the forests, he learned with ease.

And she was with him every day, every night until he fell asleep. And he wondered when, wondered if, he should tell her he loved her.

* * *

Too soon, too soon, Petra grew ill. One morning she did not appear as he prepared the breakfast meal. That evening Deter found her lying near the underground lake, her face damp with fever.

"What can I do?" he asked her. "I can make an herb tea, but I don't know the plant I'll need here. Tell me which one." He begged her, but she shook her head.

"I'm beyond mortal medicine," she said. "I'd need a shaman, a healer priest." The word struck at him, at his refusal to be just that. Yet, otherwise he would not have come to her at all.

"Do not worry, friend," Petra told him. "I have these fevers. They come. They go. I will always suffer thus."

Deter could not accept her resignation to her suffering. That night while she slept he sat down beside her in the cool sand and began to meditate. Little by little his mind found its way through the Ether to her spirit body. He expected to find an element of illness inside her transparent form, some fire elemental, some parasitic totem. Instead he found . . . a nothing. He found a hole in her spirit filled up with bitter yearning. Her bitter infection he could drain away as easily as pouring water from a jar, but what would heal her emptiness?

There could be only one answer. His love for Petra made such perfect sense. Where there was illness there was also cure; this was the way of nature. Deter would fill her spirit with a part of his, bind himself to her forever.

When it was done, he lay down beside Petra and slept.

* * *

She sat watching him when he woke, again. Deter rose up on his elbows. "You're feeling better?" he asked, and she nodded, smiling. "You won't get sick again, you know."

"I know. I can feel what you did to me, how you bound your spirit to mine."

Deter looked away, feeling his face heat. He needed to tell her how he felt.

"My shaman," she said and ran her fingertips along his cheek. Her skin was always cool as the sand beside the underground lake. "My priest."

But these words took him aback. There was something . . .

"I didn't think you could help me," she continued. "Not after you ran away to avoid being bound as a priest to the spirit of your land." Her smile faded when she focused on the concern upon his face.

"What are you saying, Petra?"

She hesitated. "You didn't know," she said at last.

"Didn't know?"

"Oh, I am sorry, Deter. Sorry for what you did." She choked out a heavy sigh. "Sorry to tell you what I am."

"*What* you are?" he repeated.

"You believed a mortal woman could survive out here alone? You thought a mortal woman could help you survive all this time?" She gave in to a sad moment's laughter. "Deter, I'm the spirit of the Waste."

He scrambled to his feet and stumbled a step back. "The – the spirit…" He couldn't find the breath to finish.

"I'm sorry, Deter," she said again. "I didn't mean for this to happen. It's just, I've been so ill since all the people left. I can care for the plants and animals here, but it's not like having men and women and children to watch over. Then you came."

He shook his head, disbelieving. "That emptiness inside you was loneliness for Man?"

"Yes, but it's gone because of you."

"What have I done?" he said, at last truly understanding.

Still kneeling, Petra shook her head. "Something I cannot undo. If I could, I wouldn't . . . unless it be your will."

My will, Deter thought. Since when did spirits care for the will of Man? Since when did they care for anything but their scheming?

And yet . . . Petra lived here alone, as solitary as her land. She had no games to play, no schemes, no spirit enemies or allies.

Exhausted, Deter fell to his knees, his heavy head bowed. "I serve," he said. He had no choice. Gods help him, he loved her. He had no choice.

Petra lifted he chin with her cool fingertips. "I serve as well."

His gaze searched hers. *Stone and sky*, he thought again. "I love you," he said.

And she put her arms around him. "And I you."

The End

Long Arm of the Law

By Steven Richards

Rancher stepped out of time—and to the untrained eye, thin air—and paused in a patch of shade beneath a jutting spike of white stone. Normal space took a momentary detour around him while it considered the situation, then snapped back into place as his body shifted to conform with its rules. He stood still, adjusting, enjoying the wind on his bare skin. He surveyed the labyrinthine depths of the canyon around him, searching for his quarry. Water rushed through an underground stream beneath his feet, pulsing with life and energy—it glowed in contrast with the coolness of the dead stone. In the distance, perhaps a kilometer from where he stood, the stream split into watery veins and poured out into the open, gushing from striated rock. Farther still, fed by several such streams, a river formed, continuing the eternal, questing search for stasis. It would eventually find what it sought, when it flowed into the lake at the western edge of the canyons, where Rancher pumped it out to supply his own meager needs and that of his stock.

If only the humans would reach such stasis and leave him in peace. But it was against their nature, he knew. They had made that abundantly clear, over the years. They were such strange creatures, and yet, something about them always seemed familiar, as if their species and his were somehow related, through time and space and history long forgotten.

This one in particular. Rancher scanned the canyon briefly before picking him up again, far to the north. This one had almost as much knowledge of the land's intricacies as Rancher himself, and was making good time. The human was skilled. And Rancher was wearying of these incessant escape attempts. He wasn't as young as he used to be, when the humans first arrived in their malfunctioning tin can.

The third perimeter fence was reporting multiple breakthroughs—the humans had taken to sending out decoys on their recent runs. He ignored them, as usual. He knew who the real target was; you couldn't hide a signature like that, even from his untrained vision.

The pursuit began again, as the setting sun brought a fiery glow to the rock.

Michael called up the topo map to his right eye and checked his route for the nth time. He was still on course. The end of this cursed maze was very, very close. He allowed the implant in his chest to generate another dose of adrenalin. This could be the day, even if the decoys had failed miserably in their task.

He modified his stride slightly to cross a chasm, and spanned its five-meter gap with room to spare. His shadow, bulging strangely with equipment, stretched from the ridge on which he

ran to the chasm wall opposite him. If he were to glance right, into the sun, he knew he would be able to see the enclave, glittering in the distance. He didn't dare. Another crevice came and went beneath his feet—a million more surrounded him. He kept his head down, vigilant.

Something *ping*ed inside his skull, notifying him of a blip on the Dispersal Team's latest gadget. The Warden was out there somewhere, following him, and the sensor had picked up its presence. Where or how far remained, unfortunately, a mystery, but Michael knew he was not in danger yet. He had made this run nearly a hundred times now, and he had come to trust his instinct, a more valuable instrument than his biomechanically-enhanced senses or all the electronic wizardry the DT provided him with. He reached back in mid-stride to touch the stock of the rifle, his newest toy. Its presence reassured him—it always helped to have a few surprises for the Warden. You could guarantee he would have a few for you.

Michael launched himself into empty space with reckless speed, drawing a pair of explosive-bolt pitons from his belt. Bare rock rushed toward him, first ten meters away, then five, then none. His boots slammed into the wall, checking his speed. He drove the pitons forward. They punched into the stone and secured themselves in a matter of microseconds. Thus secured, he pulled himself up until he stood atop the protruding metal spikes, face-to-face with the rock wall with hands free. He uncoiled the grapnel line from his forearm, latched it to a drone and sent it on its way.

Rancher held a mangled snare—the same type of trap that caught this very human during his last attempt—in his hands and watched the wayward human climb. The tiny, distant figure broadcast a tight beam of energy back to the human nest, no longer concerned about revealing his position. What information he was sending, Rancher didn't know, and did not particularly care. He had long since given up on deciphering their airy speech and binary signals. Someday, perhaps, he would be forced to reveal the humans' presence, and a linguist would come in contact with them.

The human hesitated at the lip of the cliff—checking for more traps, no doubt—before placing his arms atop it and swinging up. Rancher folded the snare and placed it in his satchel. He would have to step into the higher regions to catch this one if he wanted the chase to end today. The decoys were already venturing uncomfortably close to the borders of his land.

He stepped out of normal space. Familiar terrain blurred and faded, giving way to truer underlying spatial characteristics—and valuable spatial flaws. He searched briefly for a local pocket, and soon found one that wrinkled to a layer reasonably close to the human. He folded himself into it and came out on the ridge, which had long since been vacated.

There he was, already several layers away, bounding through twisted space with an unnatural, gravity-bound gait. Rancher set out after him, sliding into the low points like water, always running downhill. He was catching up.

Seventy-three attempts by this one human, and he always caught up.

Seventy-three attempts, and the Warden always caught up. Michael felt another frantic *ping* as his pursuer jumped from the customary base dimensions to one of the many higher levels—but not quite high enough that the DT had yet to create a device able to sense it. Michael knew the Warden was fully capable of doing so, at considerable expense of energy.

Well, they had a little surprise ready for him if he did.

Assuming the thing even worked.

Michael sent another tight-beam transmission back to the enclave, updating his position and status: *Warden closing in second or third level; intend to engage*. He had been given strict orders to use the rifle only as a last resort, at the moment capture became imminent. The higher-ups called it a professional courtesy. Michael understood their desire to avoid a direct confrontation. He knew, as all the runners knew, that if the Warden so chose he could annihilate the entire enclave in an hour's time. Yet—aside from two early incidents—he had never harmed a runner. No one was quite willing to jeopardize a thousand years of relative safety for the faint possibility of injuring the god-like Warden.

It was a curious relationship.

The response came back from the enclave, short and to the point: *understood*. Michael put on a burst of speed, sensing another jump just before the sensor registered it. A snare burst out of the ground in front of him, and he split it in two with his flux-knife before realizing he'd drawn the blade. He doubted the Warden would replace this set.

A shimmering figure stretched out its arm to block his path. The sensor went berserk. Michael dove under the arm and rolled. The rifle slipped from his back and landed in his waiting hands. The Warden jumped again, leaving an implosion of empty air behind him and a crackling streak of energy. Michael lunged forward, ready for the maneuver, and spun in mid-air, catching a glimpse of the ghost-like presence as it prepared to jump again.

The rifle hummed as he fired.

* * *

Reality folded in upon itself alarmingly, eventually forming a shape that, were it interested in such things, would have been on very friendly terms with a hypercube. Rancher stepped back into the higher dimensions and cringed as the sensation worsened. Two more levels and he was able to open his eyes again. The dizziness slowly faded, but for the first time since his first encounter with the humans, Rancher felt on the verge of panic.

They had never attacked him before. He regarded them with a certain fondness—particularly this very talented runner. It had made him careless. Now the human—moving at speeds no other of his species could match—was very close to the third marker, at the outermost border of Rancher's property.

Find him. Stop him.

Rancher went higher still, into the shadow realms.

Michael could see the desert. Long had the Enclave sought to reach and cross this sandy wasteland; ever had it eluded them. One more mile. Two more minutes. He shot off another transmission: *third marker*. He could imagine the cheers back home; there'd be a party tonight, even if the Warden caught him.

The pings had stopped. He was beginning to prefer the old days, when the Warden was *always* undetectable. It was less nerve-wracking to constantly expect something rather than wonder about it. He put on a burst of speed, obeying a combination of gut instinct and the data generated by the scanning implant in his brain.

Sooner than anticipated, he was blindsided by what felt like a slow-moving and entirely invisible freight train. He lost his footing and fell, sliding across loose rock and rough dirt. His vision swam, and then he blacked out.

No more than a second could have passed before he regained consciousness, for now he

tumbled head over heels into open air. His stomach tried to jump up his throat as he realized what he was looking at: the face of the Desert Wall, the cliff at the northernmost end of the canyons. Three thousand feet straight down.

More like two thousand feet, now.

He was still too dizzy to see straight, but his arms and legs moved freely, obeying the instinctive command hammered into muscle memory by a thousand practice sessions in the simulator. His hands unclasped a pair of cloth flaps on his sleeves and re-attached them near his waist. He tried to ignore the way the horizon, the ground and the sky kept trading places.

One thousand feet. The altimeter on his belt squealed.

Michael spread his arms, stretching the fabric taut, and his fall slowed abruptly, as if he had struck and passed through a brick wall. Gritting his teeth, he angled closer to the cliff face. This was a tricky maneuver under ideal circumstances, and right now his depth perception was cutting in and out. The sensors told him the cliff was fifty feet away. He blacked out again. When he opened his eyes the cliff was no more than fifteen feet away, on a homicidal collision course with his face. He jerked his body upright with three feet to spare and tensed his arms and legs for impact.

After a third blackout, he found himself clinging to the rock with one hand. Blood ran down his face from a contusion on his temple. For a moment, reality flip-flopped and the cliff wall became the floor. It was as reassuring as it was disturbing. He closed his eyes again and waited for the dizziness to clear. Whatever the Warden hit him with—and wherever he hit *from*—it was a doozy.

Rancher stood at the top of the cliff and looked down at the human. Such strange creatures, that they willingly risked their lives and fragile bodies in this endless quest to relocate themselves from one patch of ground to another. It defied logic, as well as common sense.

But then, he doubted they saw the world the same way he did.

The second ring of border sensors on the other side of the ranch were beginning to complain; the decoys had made it through the first ring and were now looking for a way through the second.

Back to work.

Michael opened his eyes and found what must have been a thousand faces gathered around and above him. Someone was saying his name; everyone was asking questions. He rolled on his side and vomited. They all looked so hopeful, so worried, so *excited*. Michael felt tired and sore and angry.

Arms helped him up, half-carried him back into the Enclave. The medics looked him over while the crowd watched from the hallway. After a few minutes of prodding they pronounced him in good health, though slightly dehydrated. The cuts and bruises were all quite superficial, they assured him. His body would take care of those on its own in due course. Someone brought him water.

Later, after Security dispersed the crowd and the medics moved on to check the incoming decoy runners, a familiar baritone interrupted his rest.

"Michael."

Michael sat up on the bed, wide awake instantly. "Councilor." It was not yet time for his debriefing, and the DT usually conducted those internally before sending a report to the Council.

"What can I do for you?" The Council did not have a formal leader, but if it had, this man—nameless as the rest—would have been it.

"I have a question for you, Michael." The Councilor smiled faintly, a brief, upward tug at the wrinkled corners of his mouth as his gray eyes focused on some amusing thought within his own mind.

"I will do my best to answer it, Councilor," Michael responded, adding a deferential nod.

"Today's run seemed…different. You know the Warden better than any human alive; what will he do?"

Michael chose his words carefully. "We frightened him today."

"Frightened?" the Councilor asked, startled. "How?"

"The disruptor. The third marker. My new abilities. I'm growing stronger and faster; *humans* are growing stronger and faster, and the Warden is only getting older." Michael hesitated. "He'll have to take more permanent action soon."

"What type of action?"

"A replacement. There are others like him—towns, cities, perhaps an entire civilization. Inconceivable as it seems that no one else witnessed Impact, the Council itself has long believed our presence here to be a secret kept by the Warden. That may change."

"You think he'll tell the others?"

"He must," said Michael. "He fears our species and what will happen if we encounter his. Inevitably, he'll have to give over his role as lawman to whatever authorities exist on this planet."

"And what will *we* do?" the Councilor asked, a little sourly. Michael's assessment did not leave him feeling very optimistic.

Michael frowned thoughtfully. *He who hesitates is lost.*

"Well, I've got this idea…"

The End

The World's Edge

By Jonathan Ruland

When Roddic crested the ridge and saw the endless miles of frozen wasteland below him, he knew he had reached the last stage of his journey.

A chill wind swept up from the plains and he pulled his fur cloak tight about his shoulders as he smiled grimly. He had crossed the jagged mountains of the Wall, and the World's Edge was close at hand. He allowed himself a moment to drink in the sight, then hunched his shoulders against the cold and continued north down the mountain slope along the narrow path.

That night he made no fire, and he shivered himself to sleep. Later he woke up, shivered himself back to sleep, and repeated the cycle at least a half dozen times before the sun's chill rays touched his face the next morning. He was uncomfortable, but not miserable, as most people would have been. As a child he had been in and out of orphanages in the northern cities, shivering in the streets or under a roof and walls that greeted the cold like an old friend. As a young man he had only slept indoors when the mercenary work granted him enough money to afford more than a bottle for warmth, and those times had been rare indeed. It had been weeks since he had been truly warm, but it bothered him little.

The moon that night was huge—it had been growing steadily as he traveled north. But like the sun it was pale and cold, and somehow it seemed to be darkening.

The next morning he reached the plains and found that they were rocky and swept clean by a strong wind; springy tundra grew between the boulders on the rare patches of bare ground, but there were no trees or even any bushes. The narrow path wound its way across the plain, and sometimes he found himself in narrow valleys where the wind could not touch him; but most often the path carried him over little ridges and hills where it cut to his bones like the bite of a cold blade. And that was one feeling he knew all too well.

The sun never made it halfway up the sky—not even close. The day was short, and he forced himself to travel into the night. He was cresting one of the low ridges when far to the north he saw a twinkling orange light and he knew he had spotted a fire. Instinctively he clutched his sword. Too often fires would also mean blood out here in the wilderness, and this far north near the World's Edge…the fires were rarely made by men.

He shivered that night beneath an overhanging boulder, wondering if the creatures that had made the fire would catch his scent and find him, but when dawn came he was still alive. He kept to the valleys whenever he could, skirting the road when need be to avoid being seen, but every now and then he was forced to crest a hill or ridge and he would dash to cover as quickly as he could.

The ambush took him when he was at the bottom of a rocky valley. He was picking his way between the rocks when something hard and heavy struck his lower spine, and he stifled a cry and toppled forward. His hands saved his face from dashing against the rocks, but they were not so fortunate. There was a sharp pain in his hands and when he looked he saw that his deer hide gloves were torn and red blood was blossoming.

Inhuman snarls filled the air behind him like the baying of jackals, and he threw himself against a boulder and drew his sword, certain that he had met his end.

Hunched humanoid figures emerged from the rocks, covered in animal furs. Their heads were like a cross between a wolf's head and a pig's, and their legs were like those of a goat's. There were ten at least, armed with spiked clubs and slings. Their snarls pierced the chill silence.

Helplessness flooded him, but rage quickly replaced it. He would kill as many of these things as he could before he died. He threw back his head and thrust his sword high into the air, and his roar dwarfed any sound they had made. He turned his burning eyes back to them…

But they had all come to a confused halt.

They exchanged looks with each other, and they studied his face. "What are you waiting for?" he said in a low voice, like a growl. "Death is waiting for all of us. Let's not keep him long."

A particularly large creature stepped forward. "What are you?" it said in a rasping voice.

Roddic's rage flared again, and he bared his teeth and glared a challenge. "That's what I wanted to find out at the World's Edge."

"Take off your glove and show me your hand," the thing hissed.

Roddic hesitated, then spat. What did it matter now? He slipped off his left glove and showed them all his hairy hand, and they made hissing noises that might have been gasps. Roddic sneered at them with contempt.

Everyone he had ever known had thought of him as an animal. His whole body was covered with coarse hair that might have been mistaken for animal fur if it had been thicker. It even covered his back and his palms. He had given up shaving long ago, and a thick beard covered his face. It was quite useful up here, near the World's Edge, but in the cities people despised him. Mothers would hold their children close when he passed, and there were few taverns that would serve him…few women who would satisfy his male needs even when he had good coin.

"You will not like what you find at the Edge," the creature hissed.

Roddic spat again, and it landed only a few feet from the beast. "I didn't expect I would."

"Then why go?"

"Because I have to know what I am."

The creature nodded and held up the back of its own clawed, hairy hand. An eight-pointed star was carved into the flesh. "Cut this into your skin," it hissed, "and show it to anything you meet. If it is not a beast, it will allow you passage to the World's Edge."

Roddic took a step back. He had at least twenty noticeable scars on his body, but those had all been inflicted by someone else.

He opened his mouth, but before he could reply the creature raised a hand and bellowed, and in seconds it and its fellows were gone. Roddic stared for several moments, not daring to believe that he had escaped with his life. At last he laughed bitterly and started north again. Death would most likely find him soon, but not today. He couldn't decide if he was relieved or disappointed.

It took him the rest of the day, but that night he made his decision. He didn't make a single sound as he carved the star into the back of his hand with his narrow dagger, but the pain

kept him from almost all sleep that night.

Another group of monsters attacked him on the road that day. These ones had bears' heads and giant clawed feet like those of hawks. As they approached, Roddic withdrew his glove and held the eight-pointed star for them to see, his heart racing with the anticipation of battle.

It took them a few moments, but one by one they skidded to a halt and looked sullenly at the star. Then their leader raised a paw, and they disappeared just as quickly as the other pack had.

For days he journeyed on, occasionally running into groups of creatures of different shapes. Sometimes they brought vicious, horrific pets that bore a slight resemblance to the dogs that men kept, and sometimes they rode mounts with red eyes and jagged teeth that now and then reminded him of horses. All of them let him pass when they saw the star.

Once he heard roars and screams and the clash of metal, and he crested a ridge to find a small battle being fought between creatures with heads like vultures and four-legged beasts with long yellow fangs and black beards to their knees. He carefully kept his distance and hurried around them.

The sun grew paler and the moon larger until it covered much of the sky, yet its pale face darkened every night until it seemed to give no light at all. The stars were fewer whenever the sun disappeared, and the sky was black as the hand of Death.

Another blackness was swiftly approaching, though it was not pure black like the sky—before him to the north the land sloped upward into a patch of darkness, where the World's Edge lay waiting for him.

A day from the Edge he was attacked by a creature that did not respect the eight-pointed star.

He was hurrying across a hilltop for the relative safety of a valley when he heard a snarl, the clatter of falling rocks, and then a roar that startled him. A giant scaled creature like a crocodile slithered from a dark opening in the earth, twenty feet long at least from tip to tail. Its eyes were red and its fangs yellow and fire belched from its mouth at him, falling short by only a few feet.

He saw instantly that it was a beast, and he drew his sword and leapt back, but the creature roared again and charged. Its speed startled him, and he just managed to leap from its path before its massive jaws clamped down where he had been standing.

The monster screamed in rage and fire shot from its mouth at him, and searing pain covered Roddic. He screamed, half in pain and half in fury as the liquid fire burned into his left arm and the left side of his body. Something caught fire inside him, and with a scream that seemed to shake the earth he leapt at the creature and swung his sword with all his strength.

The blade clove into the creature's neck with a black flash, severing the bone. The beast convulsed and its great front leg smashed into Roddic's chest, and he felt ribs snap as he flew into the dirt. The thing thrashed in its death throes and the head snapped off, sending dark steaming blood to stain the tundra and burn away the little plants. It collapsed in a foul heap and lay twitching.

Roddic did his best to dress his wounds, but there was not much available for his burns and nothing at all for his broken ribs. His entire left forearm and much of his side would be scarred, and it would be weeks before drawing a breath would not pain him.

Yet at least he was alive. He shook his head at the thought. Perhaps it was good to be alive, and perhaps not. After all, he did not yet know what it was like to be dead.

He slept very little that night for the pain that coursed through him, but he knew that his journey was nearly at an end and the next day he would reach the World's Edge.

The road led him to a great gate in a massive black wall—the wall that lined the border of the world of men. Through that gate, it was said that Death ruled. He allowed himself a wry smile at the thought; perhaps Death ruled on both sides.

Two giant guardians stood there, colored red like stale blood and armored in black with claws on their hands and visors hiding their faces, and each held a massive war scythe. They were twice his height at least and three times as broad.

"Welcome, Son of Flame," they said to his great surprise. "The Master is expecting you. Follow the Black Road to the citadel, and you will find him."

They stepped aside to let him pass. He hesitated. A long road lead into the blackness, and to either side the land was dark as night. No. Black as night. The blackness pressed in like walls to either side of the dark path. Occasionally a distant wail or moan reached his ears, curdling his blood. To enter that gate was to enter the bowls of hell.

"You are the first to arrive," said one of the guards. "If you wait too long you will not be the first."

Roddic did not know what that meant, but he had not come this far to turn back now. He stepped through the gate.

If it was cold in the wastes before the wall, it was freezing in the land of the dead. Chill blackness stretched to every side—even above him. The enormous moon was like a black shadow against an even deeper black, and the sun was gone. Far ahead of him the road wound up and up as if ascending a mountain, reaching to a dark red patch in the far distance. Shivering, he hurried onward.

Wails and screams echoed out of the darkness, only half of them human. Occasionally eyes watched him, but he would snarl at them and they would disappear.

He might have traveled for half a day when he first encountered the dead. Their hollow eyes watched him from mangled faces, and their bodies were mutated and mutilated to a mockery of human form. Some of them reached for him and clasped his cloak, but he would shake them off. If they did not shake off easily then he would part their hands from their arms with a swift stroke of his sword. It would often take them a moment to realize what had happened, and then they would go slowly chasing after their severed limbs.

At last he reached the citadel, weary and in pain, but too close now to stop for sleep. Nor did he dare sleep here.

The gates of the citadel were like a patch of steel midnight that reached toward the blacker sky, but they swung inward as he approached and came to rest with a massive *CLANG*. A great stone stairway loomed before him, lit with red torchlight, but nothing else moved. He entered the citadel and began his ascent, and his footsteps echoed in the silence.

There were five hundred steps at least, and he had to stop for breath several times before he reached the top. A huge double door stood before him, shining with a red luster. When he approached, it too swung inward.

The sight before him nearly stopped his heart. A carpet ran forward a hundred paces, spattered here and there with old blood. Dark red demons stood to either side, armored with the night and carrying weapons that seemed as if they were hewn from Death itself.

And Death…he sat on a bloody throne at the far end of the hall, elevated high above them all, and the Queen of Darkness sat at his side. He was like a living shadow—his entire body was like the darkest patches of midnight. And his eyes…they burned with a chill red flame.

"Ah," boomed Death's voice. "I have been waiting for you, my son. Come." An unseen force took Roddic and threw him into the room, where he landed in a kneeling position. The great doors swung shut behind him, cutting off any escape. Yet he knew any hope of escape had

disappeared when he had set foot into the black land. "Come to me, my son," said the voice of Death. "And kneel before my throne so that I might touch you."

My son… Slowly, Roddic approached. Hundreds of eyes watched him, including the burning red eyes of Death that were like icy spears. Yet somehow, he did not tremble. When he reached the throne, he dropped to one knee before Death and put his face to the floor.

A chill hand touched the back of his head, and he suppressed a shiver. "You are strong," said Death, pleased. "The first of my bastard sons has arrived a hale warrior. Have you already tasted your power, my son?"

Death's son. Power. He remembered fighting the beast in the wastes; the way his sword had flashed black and he had severed the creature's spine with unnatural strength. "Yes, my Lord Father," he said.

Death threw back his head and laughed, and it was the sound of Terror itself. It curdled Roddic's blood, but somehow…instead of chilling him it warmed him. "You see, woman!" said Death to his queen. "My seed is strong! The first of my bastard sons is already a great warrior. When you bear me my heir, he will have the strength of the gods." He addressed the room. "My son has come home! Let us feast and rejoice." Death stood, towering over Roddic, and drew him to his feet. "Soon, my son, I will tell you my purpose for creating you. But for now let us sup together as father and son."

* * *

I am Roddic, and my father is Death. No one has ever loved me or cared for me, but he does now. He created me for a purpose, and with my whole heart I will serve him with the same love he has given me. I will do as he says; I will return to the cities and I will kill and feed him with the souls of my victims. Their blood shall sustain me, and their torment shall sustain him. My blade will find men, women and children alike, and together my father and I will drink their deaths. One day I will meet my bastard brothers, and we shall serve our father together until our dying breaths—and our dying breaths will serve him if need be. And until then we shall love each other with all our hearts as no one in the world of men would ever love us.

The End

A Revision of Beauty

By Keri Stevenson

Tamalheim had become stupefied in the sun again, and she would have to climb up to his ledge and rap him on the head to bring him back to rational thought.

Soralingas considered, as she hooked her left hand into the rock above her, shifted her arm, shifted the flap of skin down her side, and then lifted her left foot, whether this was worth it. She did not have to take on this duty. She had wanted to, because she had wanted to find out if the claims of wyverns surviving here were true. Even working with Tamalheim had not been enough to deter her.

Perhaps it should have been.

At last she reached his level, and tapped the snake-like head with her right hand. The shapeshifter shook it and swiveled his eyes—on stalks connected to his sides at the moment, rather than in his head—to look at her. The eyes blinked rapidly. Soralingas twitched one lip up, a gesture that would have riffled her whiskers if she hadn't cut them back.

"What happened?" Tamalheim asked.

"The same thing that happened every other time," said Soralingas. She sat back and studied his body, looking for some sign that the sun had hurt him. Of course it had not; the flat back, long tail, crooked legs and green-gold scales shimmered, alive with health. But the sun dazed him with warmth as well. Without her there, Tamalheim would race in circles, then sit still until the sun set behind the rock formations, the coolness making him too torpid to move.

"Come on. I want to reach the top before dusk." She rose, the wind softly stirring the skin at her sides.

"I was comfortable," hissed Tamalheim, and continued a barrage of complaints that she ignored out of long familiarity with them.

Soralingas only tilted her head back to look at the top of the cliff. This was the last ledge before the summit. The orange-red rock shone around her, the rich color of cinnabar. An arch crowned the ridge itself, only the swell of it visible from here. Beyond was a sky as blue as a dancer's tray holding, still sudden and startling to Soralingas' gaze, two enormous moons. They looked far closer than they were, which did not soothe her.

Her mind wanted to smooth and soften the rock formations into green hills, elevate the arch into a silver-blue tower, and condense the moons into one small pale disk considerably further away. It was hard to believe this world an alternate of her own. Soralingas knew of no factors, magical or otherwise, able to produce changes so extreme.

She shook her head. This very strangeness was the reason wyverns might survive here,

and why she hadn't dismissed the claim as ridiculous. She had been here less than one of this world's days. She would give it some time to stop startling her. And, of course, if it showed her a wyvern, all would be forgiven.

"…are right, we should move."

Soralingas brought herself back and nodded. "Do you want to go ahead of me, or should I lead?"

Tamalheim dug his claws in and scrambled up to answer. Soralingas studied his body. Was it too lizard-like? Would it really attract the attention of wyverns, who looked more like a cross between dragons and snakes?

Then she sighed at herself and began the careful climb, hand-arm-flap-leg. She had seen wyverns only in images, since they had died in her own version of Taitastalla long before her birth. She might be wrong about them. She might be wrong about these creatures being wyverns. She might be wrong in her fears that Tamalheim would look sufficiently like an intruder to call them out.

Yes, she might be wrong about any number of things, so the best solution was to keep climbing.

* * *

"Do you have first watch?" Tamalheim's voice drifted out, slow and sluggish. He spoke perfectly comprehensible Wild words from a box in the center of his chest, not from his lizard-like jaws. He had showed her once, spilling a great deal of blood when he pried his chest apart and then put it back together again.

"Only watch," corrected Soralingas, turning her gaze from the sky to the fire. Darkness had deepened the awesome splendor of the twin moons, and she needed to look elsewhere at times. Part of her panicked every time she looked up, longing for home.

But she had to tend the fire that kept Tamalheim warm enough through the cool night to stay alive. And she certainly had to watch, as—

Ah, yes, the torpor had taken him already. Soralingas stood up and checked the drape of the blanket over him, then stretched out her cramped limbs. She could not have done it while Tamalheim was awake. Well, she could have, but he would have mocked her.

Her sides bulged out as she turned and extended her arms to the sky. Let anyone out there, wyvern or otherwise, watch her and come to greet her, she thought. She wanted wyverns to see her, in point of fact, if they could. She had derived enjoyment from their images over all the years that she had worked at Wildhaven. She felt compelled to offer what she looked like as a gift to them.

They would see spindly limbs, far smaller than theirs, but perhaps calling to mind their own forearms, themselves tiny compared to the mighty hind legs. Her head, pointed ears, slight swelling of muzzle, and large eyes vaguely resembled theirs. But her clearest claim to kinship, and what she hoped they noted, were the flaps of skin stretching from underarms to ankles, which could unfold and bear her body on the wind like their own great wings.

Well, only from a great height to a lesser one, does it come to that.

But she had seen some images of wyverns jumping off a cliff to gather wind under their wings, too, so perhaps it was still a kinship.

Those were only young wyverns, and usually only in their first flights.

Soralingas despised the voice. It sounded like a combination of Tamalheim and Charee, the Wildhaven agent who had informed her about the case. They would warn her not to get

excited, not to hope, to calm down. Disappointments were more common than successes in their attempts to find truly wild creatures in the alter-worlds and return them to permanent safety in Wild. She had sought wyverns across three hundred years and three times that number of alter-worlds. She would not find them here.

But someone had seen them here.

She looked up, but saw only moons and dark sky. Perhaps there were stars, but the moons were too close to let her make them out. Soralingas sighed and bent down next to the fire, added a few sticks, checked on Tamalheim, and walked a beat of the camp.

She should feel at ease here in the wyverns' home.

She didn't know if it was.

She didn't know that it wasn't, either.

Three rounds later, and she had neither seen any danger nor won the argument. She dismissed thoughts of both and continued to walk, saving most of her attention for the other rock formations. If wyverns had survived, it was possible that so had bestial shainovaran, who had preyed on her species, the falingas, before they had both developed sentience. Soralingas would dislike explaining, without a common language, how different versions of the creature had made peace with her own kind in an alter-world to this one.

A loud scrape sounded across the gaps between their cliff and the next.

Even as she dropped into a crouch, Soralingas reminded herself that sound could carry a long way in this kind of air. She held still and searched in several different directions, moving her left hand, slowly, towards the pouch of violet around her neck. If worst came to worst, she would simply open a door back to Wild, the same way she and Tamalheim had come here, and escape. If wyverns lived here, they were unlikely to go extinct in the few alter-months it might be before her next attempt at contact.

How do you know that?

Soralingas hesitated, and kept her fingers on the outside of the pouch. She need only use it if worst came to worst.

She wound up staring, and not using it, when a figure stepped forward into the firelight, blinking at her. He was a male falingas, though she noted differences at once: he stood shorter than she did, with less pointed ears, and a less angular face. His whiskers, uncut, twitched and flicked in several directions.

Soralingas felt the shock cause a minor falling sensation in her head, and then the male smiled at her shyly and spoke in Wild.

"Am I intruding?"

Soralingas shook her head and stood, slowly. "How did you know our tongue?" she asked. "How did you know we were here?" Of course, she knew the second answer as soon as she turned and looked behind her. Their fire was the only light, save for the moons', for miles in either direction.

The stranger shook his head in turn. "I'm the very first agent that Wildhaven ever sent into this alter-world," he said, speaking the words as if he were afraid that he would forget them in the next little while. That would fit if he had been here for a long time and had had no one else to speak to, Soralingas thought, watching him. "I had almost given up hope of ever seeing anyone again." He moved a few steps closer. His nostrils flared as he inhaled her scent. Soralingas let herself be flattered when he smiled. No one had ever acted privileged just to smell her before. "My name is Harnovran. Perhaps you've heard of me?"

Soralingas shook her head. "No, but I was only informed of the existence of this world a short time ago." She glanced at Tamalheim, but he was soundly asleep; even if she managed to wake

him, he would only speak in incomprehensibly thick words and then drop off again. She would have to handle this on her own. "My name is Soralingas." She extended one palm.

Harnovran flicked his whiskers, and then bent and sniffed it. "Pleased to meet you, under the moons."

Soralingas blinked.

"Under the moon, I mean," Harnovran corrected himself. He gestured to the twin moons overhead and gave her a poignant smile, hinting of some other emotion hidden from her even when she sniffed him. "It affects your mind, you see, living here."

"I can see why it would," said Soralingas, but she still did not see why he would have said it. Wildhaven did not leave agents untended on alter-worlds for the months or years necessary to forget such a basic expression, and if one had died on this world, they would have informed her of it.

Unless they chose to tell Tamalheim and not me, she thought, stifling the old, familiar surge of anger. They thought she couldn't be trusted, given her wyvern obsession—that she would really choose to leave wyverns in danger if she found them, rather than bringing them back to safety. And even then, didn't he have the violet to get back to Wild?

"Something startled me soon after I came here," said Harnovran. "I, ah, spilled all my violet." He made a gesture with his hand as if to indicate the dust filtering over the side of the cliff, and then smiled sheepishly at her.

Soralingas thought of Charee, the Wildhaven agent who had sent her here and informed her that she might not see wyverns.

"Charee sent me, too," said Harnovran, bobbing his head as though he were anxious to share in a comradeship of complaint against him.

"I said nothing aloud," said Soralingas softly, moving back and letting a hand fall to the other side of her belt, where she carried a blade. "What do you want? Who are you to read my mind and still try to convince me you're one of us?"

Harnovran blinked at her, and then craned his neck around in a half-circle that no falingas would have tried. "I was only trying to learn something about you," he whispered.

"Are you a shainovaran?" Perhaps she should not doubt it, with that name. On the other hand, the old stories of the shainovaran before they gained intelligence made them out as mindless enough to attack at once, no matter how formidably armed their prey might have been. It was that which had made the falingas able to resist them until they both gained sentience.

Harnovran turned and hurried back into the darkness.

Soralingas took a step after him, then stopped. She didn't want to leave Tamalheim alone by the fire. She took a deep breath and squatted down, letting her flaps of skin trail around her. Her eyes scanned the darkness for some sign that Harnovran had taken flight, but she couldn't see anything.

What is this about? What Wild politics let someone come here, and prevented Tamalheim and Charee from telling me anything about it?

Soralingas smoothed what was left of her whiskers and determined that she would ask in the morning, and no considerations of tact or diplomacy would stop her.

* * *

"I met Harnovran last night."

Tamalheim looked up from his meal of several small lizard-like creatures he'd caught as the early morning sun made them, and him, active. Soralingas had wanted to stop him, telling

them they might be wyvern young, but she remembered how ferociously wyverns guarded their nests. She would have expected an adult to swoop down on them by now.

"Who?"

"Harnovran," said Soralingas, and leaned forward. "He was a falingas like me, and he told me he was a Wild agent sent here—long enough ago that he referred to the moons rather than the moon. Who is he, Tamalheim? Did Charee forget to tell us something important again?" She made her voice hard and unyielding as the stone beneath her knuckles. She was not about to let Tamalheim squirm out of this one. This mission, this alter-world, was too important to her.

Tamalheim spent some time gaping at her, then dipped his head to eat one of the lizards as they tried to escape. His voice came quite clearly through the crunching of his jaws. "No one came here before we did."

"He said—" Soralingas began, and then stopped. That could have been Harnovran reading her mind again, couldn't it, mouthing back the words that would make her believe he was harmless? And he certainly wasn't a shainovaran. But he could have gotten a name that sounded like the name of that species from her, since she had been thinking about them.

What was he, then? Not a wyvern.

Or Tamalheim might be lying.

Gazing at the agitated shapeshifter, though, Soralingas didn't think he was. His tail lashed back and forth, and he ate less and less, until he at last sat back on his haunches and said, "Show me the tracks he made."

Soralingas wordlessly rose and led him to the tracks. Tamalheim sniffed around them, tongue flicking rapidly, then shook his head. "Whoever did this made a good shift," he said, voice stopping just short of admiration. "It smells like a falingas." He sniffed some more, to the edge of the cliff under the arch, and then reared back again. His tongue was moving as fast as his tail now. "But it wasn't one. There's no marks here indicating the kind of leap that your kind has to make, to get as much speed as you'd need for the flight."

Soralingas carefully stepped up beside him and studied the dust. Tamalheim was right, though as usual he'd put it crudely. The dust was undisturbed, except by one set of deep marks that Tamalheim hadn't seen, since he was sitting almost on top of them.

Soralingas pushed him aside to examine the tracks. She couldn't make out anything about them. They were simply long, and pressed deeply into the dirt, even cutting the stone underneath. If Harnovran had worn blades on his feet, she would have understood, but he had not.

"Ready to leave?"

She glanced up. Tamalheim was on the other side of the arch, flicking his tail at her in a beckoning curl.

"We have to keep moving," he said. "Slit open the belly of this world and expose its secrets to the light, whatever they are."

Soralingas wrinkled her nose as she moved up beside him. "You're disgusting, Tamalheim."

"But practical," the shapeshifter said, and led the way.

* * *

The sensation of eyes watching them began at noon, and did not dim all day. Soralingas tried looking around and exclaiming and drawing Tamalheim's attention to it at first, but he ignored her and plunged on every time—or he was in a sun-stupor and she had to draw him

out—so she gave that up, and bore with them.

The eyes did not seem hostile, but she did not see what else they could be, here. The country around them continued to be strange, with not one trace of the softness it would have shown back home. They passed countless rock arches like the one they'd sheltered near last night, and countless cliffs decorated with ledges that looked hacked, and countless patches of blue sky, unshaded by clouds, with the sun and the two moons blazing overhead.

It's almost like country that's been carved, Soralingas decided, as the sun dropped into another afternoon bath of deep purple without their finding a single sign that would indicate a wyvern. It reminds me of the great cities on Fel or Pel, the ones just made without any care for the country they're fit into. But, in this case, someone has made the whole world that way.

The idea was strange, but once it wormed its way into her head, Soralingas couldn't let go of it. She found herself staring more often at the arches and ledges. No, they did not look like works of nature. Someone had made them.

Who? Who would want to carve and shape rock like this?

Her heart answered, wyverns, but she knew it could not be. Wyverns were not sentient. It was the reason they had died in the first place when the shainovaran and the falingas became sentient; they could not adapt, could not change their behavior as rapidly as species who made tools and learned from their mistakes.

That was the trouble with all of the species the Wildhaven agents brought to Wild, really. They could not adapt fast enough, or the sentient species sharing their worlds could not help them adapt. So they came back to Wild in captured pairs or singletons or convoys, where they would have a place that never required them to change again.

Soralingas sighed and rested her head against the rock for a moment. She did not want to keep climbing. She wanted to go to sleep in the heat of the day. But, of course, she could not. She had to keep an eye on Tamalheim, wake him up when he stopped, and hope to see wyverns.

A winged shape swept overhead.

Soralingas sat up, her eyes on the sky, her sudden sleepiness gone. But the wings had vanished. Perhaps it had only been a large bird, or one of the swift slips of cloud that they sometimes spotted hurrying across the sky.

Perhaps not.

Soralingas glanced back. She had drawn so far ahead of Tamalheim this time that she felt justified using her flaps to glide off the ledge on which she stood and back down to him. The marvelously cool wind caught and soothed her fur and skin; she hoped that the watching eyes saw that as well. When the mysterious watchers—the wyverns?—saw her fly, they might reveal themselves to her.

She woke Tamalheim, murmuring reassurances when he asked if anything had happened. Watching the sky, the flash of wings did not repeat, but neither did the eyes withdraw themselves.

* * *

That evening, when Tamalheim slept and a two-legged figure came walking to her campfire, Soralingas was almost prepared. She blinked when she saw it was Harnovran, but nodded and said, "This time, you're going to tell me what exactly is happening in this alter-world."

"I promise we will," Harnovran whispered. "We watched you today, and felt your mind. You truly desire no more than to see another species preserved alive and well."

"And?" Soralingas demanded, leaning forward. "Can you tell me where they are?" She did not dare speak the name wyvern aloud, just in case that was not how they referred to themselves, and might be insulted.

Harnovran touched her hand. "Tomorrow. We will tell you tomorrow."

He turned and blended into the darkness again before Soralingas could demand anything more. She sat back and pouted, then sighed and gave in. His promise was better than anything she'd received so far, from either this mysterious alter-world or the Wildhaven agents.

But what if this all comes to nothing? whispered the voice in her head that sounded like Tamalheim and Charee both combined. What if you're lifting your hopes higher, only to dash them down?

Soralingas shook her head. She would see what came, and Harnovran had promised "tomorrow." She managed to close her eyes and sleep, secure enough to believe the watchers meant them no harm, other than, perhaps, disappointment.

* * *

"He was here again."

Soralingas had shrugged while Tamalheim darted around the campsite, tongue flicking out. "Yes, he was."

"But what is he?" The shapeshifter's voice had been fascinated and frustrated both at once. Soralingas hid a smile by pretending that she had some crumbs of dried fruit in her whiskers. It would be just like Tamalheim to develop an interest in a species that was really no more than another variant of hers, the numerous falingas who worked in and around Wildhaven. Of course, he would have an easy time of it if he really wanted to study them.

"I don't know," she'd said. "But he promised some answers today. Let's keep climbing, and hope he shows us this evidence."

It was now nearly noon again, and the sensation of watching eyes had intensified to the point that Tamalheim lifted his head every few feet and stared around. Soralingas kept her eyes ahead. She had promised to wait for tomorrow—no, today. And wait she would.

"There!" Tamalheim breathed, abruptly going on the point.

Soralingas glanced up, and blinked when she saw Harnovran on a ledge across from and above them. What is he doing? she thought, even as he waved at them. She didn't think that he was beckoning for them to come up, though. Instead, he made it seem a wave of acknowledgment, and then turned his back to them. Soralingas followed his gaze into the sky, waiting for a winged shape to appear.

"No!" gasped Tamalheim, the sound a mixture of wonder and disbelief.

Soralingas snapped her gaze back down as she saw Harnovran ripple like a heat shimmer. Then he vanished. Where there had been fur was a writhing mass of golden-green scales, of lifted, vibrant wings, of mighty hind legs and an uncoiling tail appearing no different from Tamalheim's after all. Then a snake-like head projected over the wings, and looked back at them. Soralingas could make out the eyes from here, as large and dark as the ones that Harnovran had showed her before.

She watched as the wyvern spread its wings and kicked off from the ledge on which it stood, with enough force to make the feet cut into dirt and stone. The massive talons spread and skimmed and sliced the air, a straight line running from the front hard plate to the splayed back foot, high enough to elevate the distinctive front claws, long enough to make it look as though the wyvern walked on blades.

Soralingas only realized she was crying when the wyvern came and hovered above her, and she looked up at him through a blur of tears. The wyvern cocked his head to the side, and the brief falling sensation came in her mind again.

Wild words emerged from the lipless mouth, softly crooned. It was Harnovran's voice. "We came to spy upon you at first, wondering what you wanted here. Imagine looking into your mind and seeing our own images, or the images of what we once were, linked and bounded and burned with limitless love."

Soralingas held out a hand, not knowing what else to do.

Harnovran continued speaking, even as he hove closer, his eyes on her own. Soralingas could see differences from his falingas eyes – deeper and with slit pupils – and sense the power in his voice. It made the stone beneath her and Tamalheim shake, but subtly, as if the mountains were sped slightly in their changing, changeless dance of rising and erosion. "We have prospered. I came to tell you that. We became sentient long ago, and we learned to shapeshift, to read minds, to become invisible at need, to shape the world around us. This is not really an alter of your Taitastalla, not any more. This is our world, shaped and carved to flow around us."

"Amazing," Tamalheim breathed somewhere off to the side, in the world Soralingas had left behind, unstirred by the wind of wyvern wings. "How did you do that?"

Harnovran did not answer. Instead, one bladed foot extended and came to rest, with utmost delicacy, in Soralingas' hand. She stared, and felt the flex and shift of the claws in her own, the enormous warmth running through them. The sun, she thought, dazed, bewildered. They are creatures of the sun. It is part of them.

"You need not ever worry about us again," the wyvern finished. "We need not be brought back to Wild. We are free."

"But we must bring back one of you," Tamalheim was saying. "We need to know how you shape your world. It could be of immense value in rescuing other sentient species, whether in Taitastalla or elsewhere."

Harnovran shook his head. "We wish only to be left alone. You are being allowed to leave because Soralingas loves us, something we have never seen before. But, once you are gone, do not return."

He lifted his foot, then turned broadside, spraying Soralingas and Tamalheim with wind from his wings, and flew off beyond the nearest arch. Soralingas closed her eyes, because the sight of a wyvern flying, like light, like hope, was too much for her right now.

"Can you believe that?" Tamalheim fumed. "The arrogance of him? We could use—"

"Let's go," said Soralingas, standing. Her hand ached and tingled and burned. She wondered if she would bear the imprint of that enormous foot forever.

"What? But I thought you would want—"

"Charee has to hear about this," she interrupted him. "And Wildhaven. All the agents, really. A non-sentient species became sentient and protected themselves. That has even greater importance than the wyverns' ability."

"Yes, but—"

Soralingas tuned him out as she kept moving, back down the hill, back the way they had come, in search of a flat place where she could throw the violet and open a gate. Tamalheim trotted behind her, but he was the lesser companion. An enormous peace coiled and flew and sang within her.

They are alive. They lived. They survived.

There were questions to be asked and answered, of course. If nothing else, the wyvern literature, documenting their abilities and appearance, would need to be updated. Soralingas had

noted numerous differences between Harnovran and the wyverns she had seen in books.

But beyond everything else came peace, and the desire to weep and dance and laugh and sing.

They are alive.

They did not die.

There is joy in one of the worlds, still.

The End

To the Shores of Triple, Lee!

By A. M. Stickel

"Aw-right, Defectives, fall in! Welcome to Camp Alpha. I'm Sergeant Lee… That's 'Sir' to the likes o' you, greenies."

"Sir, yes Sir!" we sang out, hating Lee already with all that was in us.

Still groggy from our passage through the light gate, we raw recruits looked around, entranced by the stark wilderness. Triple was a planet aptly named, being only marginally larger than the furthest of its double-moon sister bodies. Both visible by day, they hung in the blue above almost close enough to crush us. Unofficially dubbed Cue and Eight, our scientists had named them Primus and Secundus in a language older than the game of pool.

After Lee finished putting us through pointless drills to check what he called our 'cellular reintegration', we got the "At ease, Troopers."

The red-and-brown striated rock where we'd made camp looked to me like salt water taffy frozen in mid-pull. My buddy, Reston, said it reminded him of old chewing gum gone mad. But our relaxation was brief.

"Hor-USS! Guard duty." I yessir'd Lee and quickly took up my position opposite Private Solberg's on the high rocks above the camp, becoming part of Triple's sculpted landscape in my red-brown camo.

Reston was assigned to dome-setup. After saluting Lee, he slouched off half-heartedly with the others and a mumbled "See ya' later, Horse."

We did meet again a few Terran hours later in the chow line, where I intended to do right by my nickname. Private Wolfe, across the table from me, dug into her share and honored her own handle, ignoring Reston and I as we elbowed each other and winked. Finally, we just gave up and carried our trays outside into the warm sunshine.

"When do you think the Dryl and the E-Lur will join the party, Horse?"

"With the Dryl, you can count on their shamans making a big ceremonial hoo-ha first. The E-Lurians always consult their computers to make sure they have everything exact down to the last nano-dot. Both races worry more about losing face than we Terrans do. Nope, we'll always stake first claim because we don't wait for permission from the Great Invisible, or from some inanimate hunk of bio-metal, either."

Reston chuckled and added, "N' we don't give a half-chort for face!"

Suddenly, we were in cool shadow. I flinched, expecting Lee to be there. But, when I looked up, Wolfie stood over us, wiping the gravy off her chin. "Horus, Reston, mind if I join you?"

Without waiting for a reply, she plunked her pretty behind on a nearby rock. "Ouch!" Her

tail scorched, Wolfie was up again in an instant.

"We were going to warn you about that, but you were too fast for us," I said. "These rocks'd make this place too hot for E-Lurian comfort. And the Dryl are too superstitious to deal with two moons hanging around so close."

"I still think there'll be a fight," said Wolfie, crossing her arms. "Well, they'd better show up for the showdown before I get tired of the synth-grub."

Reston gave his wheezy laugh, and then agreed in his own way. "They're going to try to save face, just like they always do. Then, we're going to wipe some more of it off when they try."

Wolfie fanned herself, mopped her brow and took a swig from her canteen. "With a whole galaxy as our genetic swimming pool, we end up on the rim of the pool with two other humanoid races! What are the odds of that? Maybe there really is a Great Invisible."

I looked around and lowered my voice. "Don't let Lee hear you joking about it. Solberg told me Lee's grandma was Dryl. I think that's how he comes by calling us pureblood Terrans 'Defectives' like the Dryl do."

Reston held his sides and hee-hawed, "How about that—a Dryl Sergeant!"

And so, Reston's big mouth got the three of us stuck on permanent latrine duty. Why? Because the next shadow over us was Lee.

* * *

The three of us made a great team. Between us, we worked out a way to rig our blasters in tandem so that they dug the latrines faster than our laser shovels had. We figured we might never see action, so why not make use of our weapons in a practical way.

Lee was proud of our ingenuity, meaning he was not as mad at us for wasting blaster power as we'd thought he'd be. He'd watch us sweating out our shift, showing up when we least expected, solemnly saluting and asking, "How's the Dryl-Team doing today?"

"Sir, fine Sir!" We never said anything to our comrades, too ashamed to admit to our private joke. And Lee honored our silence with his.

As day after day passed—under those mismatched moons—we saw no sign of our rivals in the humanoid race for territory. Sergeant Lee, though, took their absence as a purely temporary oversight. "It's not like you've seen in holo practice, Troops," he'd say. "When it happens, it really happens. War is blood, stinking guts and frying flesh. The Dryl will freeze-ray you with cold ceremony and the E-Lur will vaporize you with hot frag. After it's over, and they've found face, they'll parlay and exchange hostages. With them, the order is always: (1) shoot to kill, (2) talk it over, and (3) kiss and make up."

The day they came, latrine duty—and Lee—saved our lives. Many in the troop were caught in the open. Lee was with us. "Get into the hole, NOW!" He didn't have to repeat the order. The E-Lur and the Dryl, while they were strafing each other, just couldn't pass up the chance to catch us with our shields down. When the shields went up, we four found ourselves on the wrong side and, literally, in deep doo-doo, but alive. The real fun of the fight for first rights to the world of Triple had begun.

Our refuge, fortunately, was one we'd blasted out that day and had only used ourselves. Wide enough for the larger two of us—Lee and I—to stand on the bottom, the latrine hole was deep enough for Wolfe and Reston to stand on our shoulders without head exposure. Surrounding blaster-hardened walls helped brace us, as artillery shocks rocked our world.

Trooper indoctrination had included the details of our rivals' torture methods. Dryl grilling called for chemical drugging; the E-Lur injected captives with nanites. Then they'd simply wait.

We Terrans reversed the strategy by letting the enemy waste their firepower against our impregnable shields. Said enemy tried hard not to damage property they were after so as not to alienate their tax-paying, procreating public. Since they did a lousy job of protecting the landscape for the proletariat, their governments were forced to call in Terrans to repair the damage and public sentiment. The fanatic Dryl and the ascetic E-Lur disliked cleaning up their own messes.

BRAK-AK-AK-AK-AK! POW! The sky glowed crimson.

After that close one, Reston was first to break our unspoken no-talk pact. "I think I'd rather be Dryl-drugged than stay down here much longer. Horse, I don't know how you guys can stand it where you are."

Wolfe and Reston had their arms around each other with her head on his chest. And here he had the gall to complain! I waited for a pause in the blast noise before I growled at Reston, "Sarge is meditating."

"Go ahead and climb out, Reston, if you're not anxious to celebrate your nineteenth birthday or see your buddies enjoy theirs." Lee always did look on the bright side for his solutions. I abetted him by gripping Reston on the shin above his right boot top and squeezing hard.

"Okay, okay, you guys. I'm sorry I said anything," Reston whined.

"I think I'm gonna barf," admitted Wolfe, shifting.

"You wouldn't want to do that to us, Wolfie," I said, reaching up and giving her leg a gentler squeeze than I had Reston's, adding, "Reston, give her one or two of them fizzy chews you always carry."

Pretty soon I heard crunching sounds and ungraciously blamed Wolfe. With a closer look, though, I realized that the crunching was marching feet. Too soon, the feet were poised on the brink of our prison. What I saw, before a bright light blinded me, made me wonder why I'd ever left my nannies in the crèche to become a soldier. It also convinced me how absurd the rumor was about Lee's grandma being Dryl.

While the rest of us stood gaping, wetting our pants and trying to shrink into them, Lee's blaster was out and fired. A terrible howl and a thud told me I'd heard my first Dryl join the Great Invisible…not any too soon for me.

The next thing I heard was my beloved sarge saving our lives for the third time: "Out! On the double! Head for the shield and don't look back."

* * *

We'd almost reached Camp Alpha's shield when Lee yelled, "Duck and roll, Troops!" I heard the shrill blast of a whistle and recognized it as the one Lee used to single out one of us for discipline. Only this time, there was an answering echo from the shield, which forced us to cover our ears as we rolled *under* the wall.

Mama Hen Shield had just lifted her feathers for her chicks. We felt the electrical itch of the energy field brush across our bodies, and then heard the satisfying *splat* of those pursuers who had been a little too hot on our heels.

Catching our collective breaths, Reston, Wolfe and I finally found enough air for questions.

Lee answered us patiently, one by one, in order. The troopers not monitoring the shield, or otherwise occupied, gathered around to hear what their sergeant had to say.

"Reston, the enemy troops couldn't follow us inside because they have the wrong biosignatures. A signal-addressed shield only recognizes Terrans."

"No, Wolfe, our Dryl discoverer, with nothing on but boots and a freeze blaster, wasn't the usual breed of warrior. The see-through skin signifies the suicidal warrior-priest caste. Yeah, the sight of internal organs was yucky, but the stink when they came out was worse, wasn't it?"

"Right, Horus, they were looking to take prisoners. They keep hoping to discover enough about our technology to even up the score with the E-Lur, and then breed enough Terrans for a homegrown slave population, so they don't have to pay for our clean-up work anymore."

Solberg's reedy voice piped up from the rear, "Why didn't you guys run for the shield in the first place?"

Lee narrowed his eyes and shook his head at the stupid question. "We had to wait until the strafing from above was over, and they had their own troops on the ground. You greenies still have a lot to learn."

I chimed in, "Would it make sense for them to risk hitting their holiest warriors with friendly fire, guys?"

"What about the E-Lur, then, Horse?" Solberg retorted, smirking. I could see he thought he'd put both Lee and me on the spot.

Lee winked at me and motioned for the group to follow him into the dome where the shield monitors were hard at work with their equipment. We were treated to a rare sight on the big overhead screen covering a huge section of our central dome. There sat the shiny, heavily-armored E-Lur ground troops, lounging among the rocks, watching and waiting for the Dryl to finish wearing their warriors out, before taking the offensive themselves.

Besides hating the heat, E-Lurians were used to much lower gravity. Despite their best efforts, they hadn't been able to design effective armor that protected them from both unusual heat and uncomfortable G-force. Our screen also showed the Dryl, unbothered by the heat, wasting most of their time gesticulating skyward in warding motions they thought protected them from the evil of *Cue* and *Eight*. Every now and then the sluggish E-Lur would rouse enough to vaporize a Dryl who came within range.

The dome show went on. After checking the bodies of those fallen in the initial onslaught, the Dryl freeze-rayed the dead Terrans, as if disappointed about not getting to us live ones, or to the safely armored E-Lur.

With a "Show's over!" Lee called everyone to order and assigned new tasks all around, saying, "From now on, for at least awhile, your biggest enemy is going to be boredom, unless you keep busy."

* * *

The Dryl and E-Lur had moved their fight to Terran Camp Beta, a short distance from us on open, sandy ground. Having learned our lesson, Alpha kept her guard up while our shield techs worked on shifting the field to cover the new latrine we'd dug. It also gave them a chance to vent the area under the shield, preventing toxic buildup.

"Horus, I want you and Reston to help the botanist expand our camp's greenhouse. That way we won't have to shift the shield so often. The well we're over seems like it can support some pretty decent hydroponics."

"Sir, yes Sir!" I saluted and went to work immediately. I knew Wolfe had been reassigned

to the nanite-detection squad and trusted in her ability to prove that our area remained relatively uncontaminated.

Arriving at the greenhouse dome, I encountered Reston, who took me aside. "Camp Beta's in trouble. They got careless, and some mean nanites crept into their fresh food supply; they had to vaporize the greenhouse, slag some latrines, and go back on synth-grub. Still, a whole bunch of them had to be light-gated to emergency quarantine facilities."

"Looks like one or more of us will be making some fresh-food runs to Beta. Who do you think Sarge will pick, Reston?"

Reston shifted uneasily, "You don't hear me volunteering, especially after I peed in my pants out there under the boots of a see-through warrior."

I put my hand on his shoulder. "We all did, good buddy. Let's put our bad scene behind us, and tackle the hydroponics maze, okay?"

We set to work, both of us quiet and preoccupied. I hoped the E-Lur would realize that contaminating Triple for us Terrans and their Dryl rivals meant they were only making more messes for their colonists – if they won – which the colonists would probably pay us to clean up, as usual. I wasn't as worried about the present hexes and future taboos the Dryl would inflict. They only affected the Dryl faithful, not infidels like us.

The hydroponics worked almost too well, and we produced a bumper crop. Lee decided to let two of us pair off. Only eight were committed enough. I wanted to continue missions out in the galaxy, as did most of the troops. Four couples put their names in the helmet, two to a card. Wolfe and Reston won. The next drawing was for two fresh-food runners. Lee and I won that one.

Although everyone else was surprised Lee'd put his name in, I wasn't. I was also relieved not to be making the run with a chort like Solberg.

Thanks to the nearby moons, night on Triple was almost as bright as day, but Lee and I did have good camo, and shared a miniature stealth generator. Although not impervious like a shield, the generator's field would dampen our heat signature, scent and noise.

The night of Reston's and Wolfe's pair commitment ceremony, Lee and I set out for Beta Camp leading an anti-grav sledge loaded with delectable garden goodies. Instead of a honeymoon, the newlyweds were posted at the shield-interrupt site to guard our exit.

All was going according to plan as we left with our cheeks burning from Wolfie's kisses. I manhandled the sledge down-slope onto the sand. Lee kept an eye on both the multi-viewer and the nanite-detector. When he said, "Hot spot: veer!" and pointed, I jumped to it. I didn't want to end up in quarantine.

There's an old Terran war rhyme about a soldier returning home to his sweetheart, ending with: "Lips that touched nanites will never touch mine." I didn't want to find out the full implications of the verse, but suspected it had a lot to do with almost all Space Corps offspring being brought up in crèches. Corps couples rarely lived long enough to reproduce, let alone spend any time with their kids. I hoped Reston and Wolfe could beat the odds.

We were relieved to find everything calm outside Beta's shield. They knew we were coming, but neither the E-Lur nor the Dryl did. A low dune hid the Dryl transport, although the call to prayer was being broadcast loudly from it. The faithful wanted to find favor with the Great Invisible. Between the E-Lur encampment and Camp Beta, a sacrifice had been staked out to appease the moon demons. E-Lur braves, not busy recharging their armor like the rest, were having fun turning the sand around the Dryl female to glass. Some were making obscene gestures. (We *had* learned about those before being light-gated.) From the sound of her, she wasn't going to go down easy.

"She's screaming, 'Curse you, unbelievers!' and other things not meant to be translated for

tender ears like yours," said Lee. I could see Lee twiddle the control on the viewer and heard him grunt in dismay. "We've got a problem."

"Sir, I already know you have to whistle us under Mama Shield Beta."

"We've got more than one mama here, Trooper."

"Let me have a look." Sure enough, the viewer was focused on the naked sacrifice's glassy belly, and it showed movement of a tiny body within.

"That's barbaric. Why would they sacrifice her?" I gasped.

"We'll find out after we rescue her."

"Just how are we supposed to accomplish such a rescue?"

"Greenie, leave that to me." Then he blew the whistle. When the shield went up high enough, we dumped everything out of the sledge, and he called to the surprised faces within, "Sorry we can't stay to chat. Enjoy the chow. We gotta run along now." The shield slammed down.

The next thing I knew we were in the center of the makeshift sacrificial grounds ready to load up the struggling Dryl lovely and thereby convince unbelievers of her Great Invisible's omnipotence.

Lee proved remarkably fluent in Dryl-speak, and finally succeeded in calming down the would-be sacrifice. Sensibly realizing we wouldn't turn her over to the nonexistent mercy of her own kind, she agreed to come along peacefully, sworn on both her honor and by her Divine Protector to behave.

Arriving back at Camp Alpha, Lee whistled up the wall and went in alone, leaving me with the transparent lady. I tried not to stare, but she eyed me boldly as if she could see *my* insides. Shame for the prejudices most recently acquired from my time in the hole made me blush. Compared to me, she was brave, even if for the wrong reason.

At last, Mama Alpha blanked her shields for our prisoner long enough for me to hustle her inside. She seemed to enjoy riding on the sledge. We brought out a translation unit so that the Dryl-speak could be turned into Terran for the curious troops. She answered our questions as patiently as had Lee.

"You've asked who I am. I was a warrior princess of the Dryl until I was given to an E-Lur prince as an experiment in peacemaking. No, our names are not important. More important is that, despite our differences, we found love. The child I carry is our child. Dryl science made him possible. Most E-Lurians, however, still refuse to be one with the Dryl. Those Dryl who feel the same killed my child's father. I heard the call of the Great Invisible to join my prince. Even though this night I escaped, I have lost the will to live. If you choose to save my child by providing a host mother, then you might yet accomplish what his father and I have failed to do. Have you a candidate?"

Wolfie came forward and put her hand on the princess's shoulder. She didn't need to say anything. They just looked at each other and nodded. Reston followed his bride, for once not twitching nervously, but standing tall and proud. Lee motioned to one of several anxious medics.

"Medic, prepare three for light gating," ordered Lee.

"Sir, yes Sir," said the medic, helping the Dryl princess from the sledge.

She gazed at us, one by one, as she was led away, saving me for last. I felt a ripple of understanding sweep through me that needed no translation.

Later, when I asked Lee about his familiarity with the Dryl language, he winked and answered, "Why not ask my grandma some day?"

I stood at attention and saluted him, singing the song he most loved to hear, "Sir, yes Sir!"

And that, Your Majesty, is how you came to be raised in the crèche like me, and why I was

chosen to take you to visit your other two home worlds, since now you're of age. Seems like only yesterday I was eighteen, myself. Inside I still feel eighteen. I think High Commander Lee does too.

The End

Flinteye Learns a Lesson About Sharing

By Sean T. M. Stiennon

Purdues III wasn't worth the stone it was cut from. The two enormous moons which hovered in its sky made half the planet uninhabitable because of violent tides, and much of the rest of it consisted of endless deserts where constant dust storms and intense heat made them very uncomfortable for most beings. The only towns were on the Hoop Plateau, where settlers from the Alliance had come because of rich copper veins. Those had played out years ago, and the beings still living there stayed mostly out of stubbornness, with nothing but an occasional trading ship passing through. The Plateau itself was a maze of mountains, canyons, caves, spires, and arches.

All that made it an excellent hide-out for beings who didn't want to be found. Julli a-Andaq was one of those, and Lord Simdrell wanted him badly enough to pay fifteen thousand SEUs for his capture, alive or dead. He was reputed to be fairly good with a gun.

Axten and I set the Flint Shard down on an open stretch outside Colony 7, called "Dirthole" by some of its inhabitants and something much worse by the rest of them. As I walked down the landing ramp, with my usual pair of plasma pistols, my dagger, a lightweight slug rifle with sniper-scope, a pack full of ration bars and miscellaneous gear, and a handful of stun and shrapnel grenades, a human who looked like he had never seen water met me on the ground.

"Bounty hunter," he growled. "Why you here?"

He took a moment to look over my two-meter height, black-orb eyes, gold fur, black vest and pants, and a face that combined leonine and canine without the ears. A being with protruding fangs and a bulky slug rifle stood behind the human. He gave me an exaggerated snarl, which I didn't bother to return.

"Bounty hunting," I answered. "Julli a-Andaq. Yellow skinned arachnid, six eyes. Did he come through here?"

"Yes. Left for the wild a month ago."

I growled in the back of my throat. A month to go underground in any one of a thousand caves.

"Which way?"

"For a knife I'll tell."

I handed him a ten centimeter polyplastic dagger. The being nodded, apparently satisfied, and said, "North. Out past Old Pincer."

"Thanks," I said, just as I heard Axten's clanging footsteps behind me. He always took

longer getting his gear together, partially because he oiled his wrist blades and cleaned his finger gun before every job.

"What's this, Jalazar? Being robbed already?"

"No. Just getting information."

The human nodded. "For another knife this good, I'll tell you something that you'll want to know. Something important."

Quite a speech. He must want it badly. I gave him another—I carried a few on this sort of world, along with a couple boxes of slug bullets more valuable than their weight in SEU chits.

He snatched the dagger and hid it in his greasy robe. "There's other bounty hunters here. Two. Don't know the names. One's a little guy, black reptile with horns all around and green eyes. Got a big human with him—red hair, black armor."

I didn't recognize them, but there were millions of bounty hunters in the galaxy. "How long have they been here?"

"Left yesterday, on foot. There's nowhere to land a ship where Julli's gone."

I looked towards the town, which consisted of several clusters of single-story concrete buildings around a central mining pit. Many of them were obviously abandoned. "Any good places to eat here?"

"The Rock Pan."

"Thanks. Lock up the ship, Axten," I said, walking across the dusty ground towards the buildings.

The human's bodyguard shifted his grip on his rifle. "Wait. I want a knife too."

I pulled another polyplastic dagger from my vest—my last—and was tempted to use his throat as a throwing target. I tossed it on the ground at his feet.

Axten followed me into Dirthole. A moment later, so did the human and his thug.

* * *

The food at the Rock Pan had been harder than ration bars and even more bitter. But, a few hours after we had entered the desert the next day, I would have paid thousands for a few mugs of their watered ale.

The sun was a red giant, close enough to make even the planet's northern horizon sweltering during the summer. The air shimmered with heat, and the rough, red rock that made up the landscape rasped at my bare feet. Axten and I walked through a maze of bare stone with only occasional shrubs or avians. The giant moons had risen, but the sun was in the wrong place—no chance of an eclipse today.

I stopped on a boulder, within the shadow of a towering arch. This planet had once been much wetter. "Water," I panted to Axten.

"No, another couple hours. If you drink it all today, Jalazar, I'll have to carry you back to town, and neither of us would enjoy that."

"Alright," I growled. "But I'll die on my feet without water."

"Carefully rationed water isn't the same as none, Jalazar."

I stood up again and looked ahead. A few miles in front—maybe an hour's walk—stood a tall spire of bright crimson stone. A second spire, slightly shorter and tilted towards the first one, stood beside it. I assumed that was the Old Pincer.

"How are we going to find one being out here, anyway?" I asked Axten.

"Look for signs of habitation—smoke, old fires, bones—and run heat and sonic scans every night."

I grunted. "Why don't we walk at night, anyway?"

"I've already told you, Jalazar. Slakals come out at night."

I had heard all about slakals from every being in the Rock Pan. They had taken turns explaining them to me, since offworlders didn't come often. I had gathered that they were serpentine creatures who hunted among the canyons at night, and that all evening hours should be spent crouched around a sonic emitter to ward them off. One of the tavern patrons had gleefully told me about some slakal which had swallowed a thirteen year-old child whole—they had found the bones in its stomach.

I was about to answer Axten, but was interrupted by the crack of a bullet against the rock where I was standing. Almost without thinking, I dropped into cover on the side of the rock opposite where the bullet had come from. Axten was right next to me, ion rifle already clutched in his hands.

"Did you see where that came from?" I asked.

"A crevice at the foot of the arch over there," he said, waving at the rock structure whose top was visible above our cover.

I nodded. "I'll keep his attention. You sneak around and kill him."

"No, Jalazar. I can take a slug wound much better than you can."

"Just what I was thinking. There's two of them."

Axten nodded. "The other hunters?"

"Who else?"

"Let me know when they're dead, alright?"

I nodded, drew a pistol, and thought about the best route. The boulder was the only good cover for five meters around. We were in a dusty bowl, overshadowed by the arch, but just a few meters away was a stretch of broken rock I could creep through fairly easily. A twenty-meter bluff stretched above that, glowing red in the sunlight.

"Distract now," I said.

I watched Axten over my shoulder as he leaned out just centimeters past the edge of the boulder and fired an ion stream. I broke into a crouching run. Another gunshot cracked, but I didn't see where the shot landed. Before I had time to think about a slug-sized hole in Axten's head, I was in cover again, behind a chunk of rock the size of a field latrine.

I crouched low to the ground, feeling hot dust on my bare arms, and crawled through the rubble, careful to keep out of sight of the sniper below the arch. The dust clogged my nostrils and rasped at my throat. The impulse to cough or sneeze was intense, but I fought it down and kept my mouth closed as much as possible.

My shoulder banged against a chunk of jagged stone, and I felt the skin tear and blood well-up from the cut. I bit back a curse, closed my eyes, and clenched at the wound for a moment. I brushed dust away, still closing my eyes against the pain.

When I opened them, the barrel of a plasma rifle was centimeters away from my forehead.

Black, scaly hands with impressive talons held the weapon, and above them I saw a long-snouted reptilian face with protruding fangs, slit nostrils, and flaming green eyes. A ring of horns encircled his head, including a pair of short spurs that jutted from his chin.

"Greetings, bounty hunter," he hissed.

I didn't move. There was something about looking into a gun barrel that made my cut stop hurting.

"There isn't room for two teams in this hunt. There's only one bounty," the reptile continued. His voice was soft, but with a razor edge.

I waited. When he fired, I wouldn't even see the fatal bolt coming before it burnt through

my skull.

"So," the reptile continued, "I have an offer for you: We work together and split the bounty."

I blinked. I hadn't expected this. He could have killed me with a single shot, then gotten Axten from behind.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because you and your 'bot seem tough, although, perhaps, not quite alert enough. Because Julli is a good gunman. Also because I'd really hate to kill you like this."

"Even split?" I asked.

"You aren't in a position to bargain, but yes."

"That's generous."

He smiled, showing all his fangs. "I'm flattered. Yes or no? Should I shoot you?"

"I haven't got much choice," I growled. "Yes."

"Swear that we will work together."

I showed him my own fangs. I was shaking from the tension of having a rifle barrel a few centimeters from my forehead.

"I swear by Tson Hammerbeak, my adoptive father."

The reptile chuckled and raised his rifle. "Good enough. Now put away those pistols–you won't need them yet. I'll tell my partner not to shoot."

I stood slowly, watching his rifle. It would take him a fraction of a second to swing it up and roast my guts.

He wore a gray shirt with brass rings around the sleeves and voluminous blue pants. Steel spikes capped his boots; a bandolier loaded with ammunition for the rifle and a slug pistol crossed his chest. More impressively, a saw-backed combat knife hung from his belt.

The reptile cocked back his head, opened his mouth to show a bright red tongue, and let out a high-pitched shriek that was just within my hearing range. After a few seconds, he lowered his head and fixed his green eyes on me. I noticed that he stood twenty centimeters shorter than me.

"I'm Drail. My partner is Kurdo Jarton. Your name?"

"Jalazar Flinteye. My 'bot is Axten."

He nodded. "Let's go tell him about our bargain, shall we?"

I still had my pistols out, but Drail didn't comment. He kept his rifle in his hands with his finger around the trigger.

Axten almost shot both of us as we approached from his side of the boulder. I waved him down and introduced Drail and our deal.

He lowered his rifle. "I might have liked to be consulted, Jalazar."

"I didn't get a chance," I growled, glancing at Drail, who smiled back.

Axten stood up, keeping his rifle tucked against his hip, ready to fire. "Explain to me again how this benefits either of us?" he asked, more of Drail than me.

A human dressed in gleaming black armor stepped out from around the boulder, his heavy boots crunching on the dry ground. He wore a long-barreled sniper rifle around his shoulder. "The more beings, the easier it'll be. Julli a-Andaq knows the terrain and knows how to use a gun."

"So you want us for cannon-fodder," I growled. "Kurdo, I assume?"

He bowed, showing an impressive braid of blood-red hair. He was young, a few centimeters taller than me, his body knotted with thick muscle. His skin was pale brown.

I introduced Axten and myself. Kurdo nodded. "I didn't intend to hit you with my bullets.

If I had, you would both be dead."

Drail chuckled softly, breath hissing between his teeth with a sound like pressurized gas leaking. "Flinteye here pressed his forehead against my gun before he noticed me."

I growled in the back of my throat. "Are you planning to gloat all day? The sooner we have the bounty and get out of this desert, the sooner I can leave you two behind."

"Agreed, Flinteye, agreed," said Drail. "Why don't you and your 'bot go in front?"

"Because you seem to be in charge here," said Axten. "Don't you want to lead, Master?"

Kurdo turned to him, and the human's lips slowly lifted into a sneer. "What kind of 'bot are you? Did he program you?"

The human jerked his head toward me. Axten looked shocked. "Me, programmed by Jalazar? It's more the other way around."

Kurdo's lips shifted into a growl. Axten stepped back and slung his rifle over his shoulder, ignoring the armored human.

We walked off into the desert, scrambling over baked rocks with the sun frying us from above. Drail walked just behind Axten and I, his fingers never far from his rifle's trigger, making light conversation and smiling constantly. Kurdo roamed the rubble around us, occasionally appearing in front of us to point out the best way forward. Judging from his expressions, he probably spent the time inventing ways to murder Axten.

I hated both of my rival hunters already.

* * *

We reached Old Pincer at dusk and camped in its shadow. Our heat and sonar scans showed nothing conclusive in the surrounding terrain except for a cluster of organic heat that seemed to be a herd of small herbivores.

I could see holes riddling the Old Pincer's upper crags, and I made sure to sit as close to the sonic projector as I could while I ate my ration bars and got my six hours of sleep. Drail and Kurdo took most of the watches, but I spent the two hours before dawn staring at the stars and wondering how many better jobs were available up there. Kurdo slept with one eye open, his rifle in his hands, so I didn't feel safe moving around much. There was too much dust to clean my guns.

At one point, I heard a rasping noise from the rocks a few meters away from our camp. I snapped my head around to look, drawing a pistol, and saw something black against the stone that glowed with heat in my infrared vision. After staring for a moment, I saw that it was a massive snake with midnight blue scales and a pale frill fluttering just below its elongated head. Dark ridges lined its back and three black holes showed where the thing kept its eyes.

I didn't shoot–that might have gotten me a bullet in the back from Kurdo–and in a few minutes the thing slithered off, hissing faintly. It was at least four meters long and moved with cold stealth.

I had seen my first slakal.

* * *

We continued north for two more nights. Axten and I didn't talk to Drail or Kurdo much, but I don't think they felt any loss. Drail constantly hummed quiet songs in the back of his throat, and we saw Kurdo sporadically during the day.

On the second day, we spotted a small group of furry quadrupeds galloping through a dry

riverbed and munching on clumps of dry shrubs that grew in every crevasse. Kurdo stood on a rock a few meters ahead. He and Axten fired simultaneously and hit the same beast. The others scattered with loud brays.

The four of us descended to butcher it. Kurdo knelt at its side. "A good shot. My bullet got it through the heart," he said.

"No," said Axten, crouching across the carcass from him. The 'bot reached over and pointed at a ragged hole punched through the side of the beast's skull. "Ion stream through the brain. Your bullet just wounded it."

Kurdo looked up with a faint snarl. "A heart shot kills instantly."

"Yes, but you hit its bladder."

I bent down to look. Axten was right, and I couldn't hold back a smile. Kurdo saw my lips move and turned his snarl on me. "I don't know what you've done to that 'bot, but its not funny."

"He was like that when I met him," I said.

Drail laughed.

On the third day, we spotted a faint trail of smoke drifting up from a dusky red tor a couple kilometers ahead of us. The land around it was surprisingly clear–mostly flat, dusty ground, mottled by small tors and patches of rough scree. It was a killing ground. I would have bet my left hand that Julli kept a rifle with a sniper scope close by.

The four of us studied the hide-out from a shaded bluff. The smoke traveled up in a wisp from a dark cave on the eastern side of the tor, where the sun shone as it rose. Only a few hours had passed since dawn, and the sun outside the shade had already grown hot enough to make me sweat.

"What's your plan?" I asked Drail.

Kurdo answered. "Go there, capture Julli a-Andaq, haul him back to Colony 7, pay you your half share, and retrieve the bounty ourselves. That's simple enough for you, isn't it?"

"I was hoping for more detail," I growled.

Drail waved his hand at the tor in a sweeping arc. "We'll circle around and approach from the side opposite his cave. Then, we creep up whatever stairs he uses, surprise him, and capture him if we can–if we can't, the bounty's almost as good for his head."

I rubbed a hand against my jaw. "He'll have some kind of alarms, if not actual traps."

Drail smiled. "That's why I want you and your 'bot to go first. I'm sure you're better at detecting them than Kurdo and I."

I clapped a hand on one of my pistols, turned halfway towards Drail, and tensed for a draw and quick shot. "So we're the bait."

Drail glanced down at my gun, then whipped his eyes back up to meet mine. He showed me a toothy smile. "Flinteye, would you shoot your partner? I didn't think you were a traitor and a coward."

I bared my fangs and tightened my grip, easing the weapon up a millimeter. "I'm no traitor, and you're not the being to accuse me of cowardice."

"Perhaps not. But Flinteye, you must admit that you did agree to our partnership, even if you were under some pressure. And someone has to go first. I thought that you had enough guts to do it. Your 'bot's chromeel would stop most simple traps, anyway."

"Simple traps," I said, "but not mines or robotic guns."

"My points stand."

I slowly unclenched my fingers from around my pistol grip. "Alright. Axten and I first, if you're not brave enough."

"Don't insult us, Flinteye," grated Kurdo.

I turned to see him lower his rifle. He had been aiming at my back all through my exchange with Drail, but he didn't notice that Axten had surreptitiously aimed his finger-mounted gun at the back of Kurdo's skull.

I looked back at the open plain. As my eyes moved over it, I noticed a smudge of bright yellow about three hundred meters down and to my right. I looked at it more carefully and saw that it was creeping forwards. I also caught a flash of metal.

A small pair of binoculars hung from my belt. I unhooked them and put them up to my eyes. After focusing the lenses, I was looking straight at Julli a-Andaq. He was a distinctive being–six splayed-out legs, a pair of arms ending in three fingered hands, and an array of six large, red eyes. He carried a rifle in one hand and a satchel slung around his neck.

"There he is," I growled, pointing.

Kurdo grunted. "How can we get him? He can probably outrun us."

"Does your rifle fire stun slugs?" I asked.

"No. Why would it? Stun slugs only keep beings shocked for a few seconds."

"Mine does. Sometimes it helps just to slow them down."

I stowed my binoculars and slapped a clip of stun slugs into my rifle.

"I suggest you go catch him," I growled, dropping down into a sniper's crouch.

"Wait," said Kurdo. "Let me use that. I'm a better sniper than you."

I hesitated for a moment, then handed him the rifle. It wasn't worth arguing over, now that Julli was in sight.

"Let's move," said Axten. "He hasn't seen us, but he will soon."

I started to descend the bluff via a steep incline of red talus. Dust clogged my nostrils and the rocks raked at my feet and hands, but I resisted the urge to cough or cry out. Axten came a couple meters behind me with Drail right next to him. Kurdo lay down on the bluff, perfectly still, the rifle expertly braced by his arms and shoulder.

I watched my footing but spared an occasional glance for Julli. He still moved steadily towards his hide-out, oblivious to the bounty hunters on his tail. I hit the plain running and drew my pistols. The dust cloud we raised would be visible for kilometers around–if he was at all alert, Julli would see us in seconds. I hoped Kurdo had good timing.

Ahead, I saw the yellow being shift, glancing back. Even from hundreds of meters away I heard him scream out a curse in Vur. It meant something too nasty for easy translation into Standard. I saw the rifle come up into a firing position.

Then, from above, I heard the sound of my own rifle firing, a crack like the sound of wood breaking. Julli dropped as a stun slug hit him in the center of his thorax. I heard a loud gurgle from him that might have been something obscene.

I ran. Both my pistols had small stun slug launchers attached to them, and I switched one pistol over to fire from it. Lord Simdrell's bounty for live capture was significantly higher than the price for Julli's head, and since I'd only be getting half, I wanted the extra SEUs. Still, I'd kill him if I needed to.

I saw Julli twitch and start to rise. Kurdo fired again, hitting him easily, and the yellow arachnid dropped down again with a low moan. I raised my stun slug-firing pistol and kept it aimed at him as I closed the distance between us. Axten is stronger than I am, but I can run faster. I arrived at Julli first, stopped a few meters away, and approached cautiously, moving my eyes between his face and his rifle.

His eyelids twitched an instant before he started to swing his rifle up to fire at me. I melted the barrel with a plasma bolt and fired a stun slug which hit him just below his head on the underside of his thorax. He gurgled and fell, stunned for another few seconds. I holstered

the stun-slug firing pistol, pulled a small pair of shock binders from my vest, and snapped them around his wrists. Then I stepped back, waving to Kurdo, keeping my lethal pistol aimed at Julli's head.

As soon as he moved, shifting his wrists slightly, I growled, "Don't move, or I'll shoot."

He opened three of his eyes. "Bounty hunter...," he hissed.

Drail and Axten joined me. "How do you want to transport him?" Axten asked.

"Those shock binders are fine, if you're sure they're good," Drail said.

"I wouldn't bet my life on it," I said. "Get the heavier ones on him, Axten."

The 'bot rummaged in his pack and pulled out a pair both thicker and able to deliver a stronger jolt. He snapped them onto Julli's wrists, unfastened the other pair, and efficiently stripped our prisoner of his weapons: A pair of hunting knives, a compact ion pistol, a folding crossbow, a handful of small grenades, and a ten-centimeter throwing knife on the reverse side of each leg.

Julli had all his eyes open by now and had received one shock by struggling against his binders. He hissed at us in heavily accented Vur. "Bounty hunter scum. You won't survive."

Drail smiled fiercely at him. "You know, I might just cut your arms off–Lord Simdrell won't care."

Julli showed us an impressive rack of hooked fangs. Scraps of rotting meat clung to his teeth and tainted his breath. He got to his feet slowly. "Lead on, then, bounty hunters."

He made the last couple word a curse worse than any he could have composed in Vur, and that was impressive. Vur was even viler than Blakrack in some ways.

We herded Julli back towards Kurdo with three guns aimed at his vital organs.

* * *

Julli fought for every kilometer, and we didn't get far during the rest of that day. Drail and Kurdo clubbed him with their rifles and threatened torture. Axten and I weren't gentle, but we didn't go farther than prods and occasional kicks.

When the sun had set and the stars glimmered overhead, I said to Drail, "We should stop. I don't want to run into any slakals."

He whirled to face me, and even in the darkness I could see his eyes and fangs glimmering. White horns framed his face like the dust swirls around a black hole. "Are you afraid, Flinteye? I've had enough of these deserts. I want my bounty. Another day of this, and I'll cut off his head and leave the rest for the carrion eaters."

Kurdo stepped up to his side. "Flinteye's right. No use taking risks."

Drail shot him a glare, then said, "Very well. Set up the sonic emitter. Axten, tie Julli's legs."

Axten looked at me, waiting for confirmation. I nodded.

A minute later, we sat around a heat lamp and the sonic emitter, eating hard ration bars and drinking bitter water. Only Julli made any noise, swearing under his breath every few minutes. Axten cleaned his finger gun with a cloth and a bottle of oil.

Kurdo crumpled up his ration packaging, stood up, and said, "Back in a moment. Some business to take care of."

His black armor melted into the night as he went beyond the lamplight.

A minute later, Drail looked up from the ground and fixed me with his green eyes. "I'm grateful for your help, Flinteye, but I'm afraid that you can do nothing for me now. I've decided to keep the whole bounty. Don't move–Kurdo will shoot both of you before you can kill me."

I had my hands on my pistols by then, but I took them away slowly. My mouth opened in a silent snarl. "You lying scum," I growled.

"I'm flattered. Now, Flinteye, I can't afford to have you on my tail with your weapons. I know you'd try to kill us. So, that gives me two options: Either I can kill you both, or I can take all your weapons–perhaps leaving you a knife or two–and tie you up with ropes you'll be able to chew through in a couple hours. I'm inclined towards the latter. I don't hate you–in fact, I actually rather like you."

"Odd way of showing it," said Axten. I could see that his finger was through the trigger ring of his rifle. The finger gun was useless–he had emptied its clip.

Drail aimed his slug pistol at us. "Axten, these bullets are armor-penetrating, so they'll get through your carapace. In a few seconds Kurdo will come up and relieve you of your weapons. One of us will kill you if you resist."

He nodded to the darkness behind us. I waited, teeth clenched. I had to struggle not to roar out a few of Julli's more fiery curses.

Then, I heard a roar from Kurdo. A roar of pain. Something else hissed.

"Kurdo? What is it?" shouted Drail.

Axten snapped into action while the black reptile was distracted. He dropped his rifle, threw himself to the ground, rolled sideways, and came up on all fours. Drail fired once but missed. Axten pounced on him, smashed the pistol out of the reptile's hand, and held his extended wrist-blade against Drail's throat. "Tell your partner to come out," said Axten, "or I'll kill you."

"No, wait," I said, turning around. I had thrown myself to the ground in the hopes of dodging Kurdo's shot.

I heard the sounds of combat. Kurdo shouted, and I heard bestial hissing from among the rocks where he had crouched. I drew a pistol.

Something warm shot out of the darkness before I could fire, bowling me over. It felt as dry and hot as desert sand at noon. It knocked the pistol out of my hand, but I reached up and grabbed the beast just in time to keep a pair of twenty centimeter long fangs from sinking into my neck. I gripped it around the neck and forced it away from me.

A slakal. I could see three black eyes just above its fangs, glaring down at me with animal hunger. The creature's muscles felt like stone pillars underneath my grip.

My other hand reflexively drew my dagger. As the slakal forced itself down on me, pressing its fangs closer to my neck, I slammed the dagger's point into the side of its skull and heard bone split. The beast died as my dagger penetrated its brain.

I rolled away from the thrashing carcass and the gout of blood that poured from the wound, taking my dagger with me. "Axten!" I shouted.

I rolled around to see Axten struggling with another slakal. A second one lay dead on the ground beside him. Drail ran towards me. I drew a pistol and aimed for him, but he didn't look at me. "Kurdo!" he screamed, voice panicked. "I'm coming!"

He ran into the darkness. Axten finished off his slakal, scissoring its throat open with his wrist blades, and retracted one blade to open that hand for his slug pistol. "Jalazar? What now?"

I got to my feet, a pistol in one hand, a bloody dagger in the other. Something in Drail's expression had reminded me of the way I felt whenever Axten was endangered. Our two teams weren't really so different. My legs started moving, and I didn't bother to stop them. I ran into the darkness after Drail. A sinuous shape, smaller than the others, lunged for my leg. I pumped a couple plasma bolts into it and kept going, scrambling into the rocky scree that rose above our

camp. Sharp rocks scraped my feet.

I found Drail and Kurdo buried underneath a writhing mass of black coils in a small depression. There were at least three slakals alive, all of them fully grown–I could see their body heat. Another lay dead with its throat slit. Kurdo had his hunting knife out and was trying to hold off two at once. Drail struggled in the coils of the third–it looked like it had taken him from behind.

I raised my pistol and shot the two attacking Kurdo. I hit the first one in the head and killed it. The second shot only grazed its target, but the wound distracted it long enough for Kurdo to dive in and cut it open. Drail was too entangled for me to shoot. I lunged, grabbed the slakal, and stabbed my dagger into it three times. It was the biggest one I had seen. Drail worked on its front end, and it died after a few seconds of struggle.

There were more of them. We retreated back to the sonic emitter together, Axten, Kurdo, and I using our guns. The serpentine creatures attacked single-mindedly, and I emptied plasma into them. We killed at least five more and waited for a few minutes, standing in a huddle. No more appeared. Suddenly, Julli screamed, a raw sound that grated on my ears. "No! My pets! Cursed, cursed, cursed bounty hunters!"

"Pets?" I growled.

"You killed them. Pit devour you!"

Now I knew why he had made such efforts to delay us, but I had something else to worry about.

I covered Drail and Kurdo with my pistol, stepping back. Kurdo was occupied with supporting Drail, whose clothes were wet with blood–I saw a broken rib protruding through his shirt. "I should kill you both," I growled.

Kurdo met my eyes coldly. "Then do it. Drail's badly hurt, I can't waste time talking."

The black reptile shuddered, clutching at his chest. "Please, Flinteye. I'll give you your money."

"And you'll take Julli?"

Kurdo nodded.

I looked at Axten. "What do you think?"

Axten shrugged. "I'd feel bad about shooting them just after you went charging in to save them."

"So would I," I growled. Drail hadn't been planning to kill us, anyway.

I nodded to Kurdo. "All right. Pay us our ten thousand. For another two thousand, I'll give you my med-kit. It'll take you a few hours to patch up Drail. That'll be enough head start for us. We'll be gone by the time you get back to Colony 7."

"Agreed," said Kurdo. Drail looked like he was about to negotiate further, but a glare from his partner silenced him.

Kurdo tossed us a card. I checked it, saw that it contained twelve thousand SEUs, and threw him the med-kit. He caught it.

Then, without another word, I picked up my pack and walked away into the darkness. Axten followed me. "What about slakals?" he asked.

"Once we're away, we can take turns carrying the sonic emitter."

I had some money–almost as much as the reward for Julli's corpse. That was good. It would be enough to do some much needed maintenance to the Flint Shard and our base in the Tauri Nebula.

I hoped I never saw Drail and Kurdo again. Partnerships with their kind were more trouble than they were worth. Even if they didn't try anything shifty, I still got half the money I

would have gotten alone.

Too risky. Next time, I'd be more cautious, and avoid getting a plasma rifle aimed at my skull in the first place.

Axten and I walked off into the night, with the stars gleaming coldly overhead.

The End

Beneath the Shifting Sands

By Brendon Taylor

About once every ten years, the sands shift in the Coable Desert near Briver Downs. As the dunes scatter beneath fierce winds that last more than a month, the redstones emerge in majestic formations. The beauty of the wide-spanning arches, broad-shouldered plateaus, and gully-bare ravines is lost on the folk of Briver Downs. The red of the rock is not the only reason the arid strip between civilization and the sands is called the Bloodland. When the sand shifts, plagues, infestation, and death come. too. When the winds relent and the air clears, the land drinks the blood of those who foolishly tempted the desert's temper.

Marden Tane sat on the upper-level balcony of his grand estate, letting the warm evening breeze sift through his robes. His views of the Downs to the east and Bloodlands to the west were without equal. Although he sought the balcony for its view, it was neither east nor west that he watched. Spiny points of stratus cacti pricked Marden's leg as he leaned over the back of his lounge to reach a tall spindle of wine. Drawing a long sip, he looked up at the sky. He had been there most of the evening, drinking more than usual.

Tethrin and Telitha, the twin moons, glowed high above. Telitha had been arcing toward Tethrin for several cycles and had nearly reached her brother. *Portentious*, he thought. Yes, that was the word for it. The wind seemed to pick up with the thought, like the warm breath of a whisper growing to a stern rebuke. His food stores were full and the window and door bars secure. Others would suffer in the storm that would surely come, but not Marden.

A procession of soldiers in the Duke's colors marching up the long courtway caught his eye. *Now, that is unexpected.* The only time Duke Shiangrel thought of Briver Downs was when it came time to count taxes, and those thoughts lingered only as long as the gold did.

Moments later, Marden's house maiden found him sitting on the balcony. "You've guests, Master Tane."

Marden swirled his nearly-empty spindle and set it aside. "Tell the duke's men I'll be down within the hour. Serve them date wine and offer them our guest chambers." He did not like unannounced visitors, even from the duke.

Nodding, the maiden said, "I took the liberty of serving them spiced wine, sir. I hope you don't mind—it was the silver seal, not the gold. And, although they are the duke's soldiers, not all of them are men. Shall I go offer them rooms?"

Marden rose and took a moment for his mind to clear. "Yes, but tell them I'll be down momentarily."

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yes, fine. I just stood too quickly. Go, attend to our guests."

By the time Marden reached the guest hall, he had changed into a formal robe of green silk and gold embroidery. His hair was groomed and his face freshly washed. A dozen men milled at the far end of the room, drinking wine and paying little attention to the attendant refilling their glasses. A woman wearing a captain's badge lingered at a large oil painting on the near wall. Its reds and oranges brightened the room, but the scenes of arches and plateaus were sobering, like the embodiment of death.

"Welcome to my home, Captain." He bowed in formal greeting, trying to see her better.

She kept her eyes on the painting. "My men and I appreciate your hospitality, Marden Tane."

It was a slight affront that she didn't return the bow or face him, but who was he to question a captain in the duke's employ? "The artist would be flattered that his work draws your eyes so, Captain. Yet, you could see the land for yourself if you but stepped outside."

"Are you asking me to leave, Marden?" She turned to face him with a raised eyebrow.

He recognized the face at once and hoped she was jesting. "Of course not, Cimetra." He regretted using her familiar name as soon as it left his lips. *The rotten wine's going to get me hung*. He shook his head, hoping to clear it. "The duke's niece is welcome to stay in my home as long as she desires."

"What are you asking me now, Marden?" she jested.

He dared to laugh. "Clearly I should have let you do the talking from the start. What business brings you to Briver Downs, if you are at liberty to say?"

She finally returned the greeting bow. "Do you have a sitting room that we might use?" She glanced at the men who had begun to meander closer to them.

"Of course." He offered his arm.

She told the men to limit their drinking and took his arm.

Moments later, Cimetra Jayde stood quietly in front of a great stone creature in the center of Marden's formal receiving chamber. Even slouching, it stood more than nine feet tall with its long arms and dagger-like claws reaching the floor. In addition to being the most prized of Marden's renowned collection, it was the source of his ascension to wealth. The *Petrified Gahdir* had been featured at museums and courts throughout the duchy. Marden stood next to her and waited for her to speak.

"The death storms come soon," she said.

Marden waited for more, but she just stared at the creature. "Yes, I think you're right. Is that why you've come with soldiers? To guard the city?"

"Yes. And no." She reached out and felt the detail of the layered scales covering the limbs of the creature. A maiden brought more lamps to illumine the chamber and quickly slipped away. After the maiden was gone, Cimetra continued, "We come because the storm comes, but we're to meet the Gahdir in the desert before they can stir up the infestations and plagues."

"I hope you are jesting."

She stared at him in a way that assured she was serious.

Marden's hand shook a little as he touched her arm. "That's a death sentence. You'll have naught but a rabbit's chance against a hawk. I don't know what you did to offend the duke, but it may not be too late to go back and reconcile."

"Trust me, it's too late. By the time the wind stops blowing, my uncle will be free of one of his greatest problems, either the Gahdir or me. But I have good reason to think I'll succeed." She pulled free and walked over to some of the statuary on the walls. "You have a beautiful estate, Marden. You've done very well for yourself since you left Dagridon."

Marden nearly crumpled to the couch upon hearing the name of his home town—his stomach had already turned to ice.

"I was only twelve when you abandoned your given name and left Dagridon, but I remember you." Again, the raised eyebrow. "I would like to hear the story of how you found the Stone Gahdir."

Marden's tongue worked the inside of his dry mouth, yearning for a bit of drink. Or even spit. "I was exploring the edge of the Bloodlands... after the last great storm and saw some of his head sticking out of the sand. I hired a couple of youths to help me dig him free and load him on a wagon." The words he had so often recited sounded wooden.

She shook her head. "That's it? That can't be the whole story, Marden. A couple hired youth. This thing must weigh a ton. How did you get it on the wagon with just a couple of youths?"

"I had to hire three more to get it loaded. We used levers and rolling logs." His fingers gripped a silk pillow and twisted it almost into a knot.

"You can stop right there, if you want. I'm not here to expose you as a fraud to the archaeological community. If I didn't remember you as Anchale, the artist who rejected the duke's entreaties to serve as his personal sculptor, I might have believed the whole notion of you finding this *petrified* Gahdir." She walked over to the end of the couch and sat next to him.

"Then, why are you here?"

"Like I said, I lead the duke's protectorate into the desert to destroy the Gahdir and stop the plagues."

"That may be why you came to Briver Downs, but that's not why you came to my house." Marden put the pillow down and clasped his hands together to keep them from shaking.

"I came to *invite* you to join me. You must have seen a living Gahdir up close to sculpt it so meticulously. Anyone with that intimate a knowledge of my prey should be very useful in the hunt."

Marden knew he would lose everything if he refused her. He wished he had hidden in that bottle of wine on the balcony and had never come out.

* * *

By the next morning, Marden's head throbbed from drink, worry and lack of sleep. It was a bad combination to bring into the desert. He had methods to deal with such discomforts, but even his best herbal tonics would take rest and time to work. He did not enjoy the luxury of either.

Cimetra's protectorate had come well armed for a battle, but not for a sand storm. The netting and cloth they brought would cake beyond usefulness once the winds filled them with sand. Likewise, their water skins, food rations and medical supplies were wrong for the desert storm they would encounter. Worst of all were the tents. Most of the poles would snap unless doubled or tripled and the oilcloth canvas was not treated or weighed down properly.

Using the most respectful tone he could muster, Marden listed his concerns to Cimetra over a late breakfast of sweet cakes and juice. Normally, Marden preferred to entertain his guests on the balcony or in the garden. Morning was usually the best time of day in Briver Downs, but the winds had already begun. Instead, they sat in his private study. He savored the last of his cake, wondering how long it would be before he enjoyed another.

His serving maid reached to take his empty plate, but he waved her hand away. "Maybe one more cake, Dinevra." She nodded and left.

Cimetra had hardly eaten any of her cake. "I suppose finding you was the right move, then, Marden. I've no doubt you could outfit my protectorate with the proper desert gear and remedy all these complaints."

Marden thought he heard something in Cimetra's voice that wasn't there the night before, perhaps fear or worry. "Of course I could normally obtain all that is needed, but we just don't have enough time. Had you come here a week or two earlier or even sent word..."

"But I didn't."

The storm would begin that night and with it would come the Gahdir. There were so many things he hated about being forced onto this journey. Oh, how his head ached.

Cimetra drank from her mug of spiced tea. "I ask a great deal from you, Marden, but I do so out of necessity. I won't waste time to tell you of the impossible demands made upon me in this journey."

"I can manage to get most of the supplies. We can double the poles and canvas from your tents and have the material oiled. Your soldiers will be cramped, but four doubled tents should hold most of the men, and we can buy another two tents – we'll need extra pegs and lashings. But everything will cost two or three times its value with the storm nigh." He looked expectantly at her.

"I suppose I chose well by coming to the richest man in the valley for assistance," she said.

"Should I send the bill to Duke Shiangrel?" Marden smiled, knowing his hope was a fool's.

"Send it if you wish, but if it gets paid, I'll eat a bull, horns and all." Her smile easily outshone Marden's.

Marden really did not care for that expression, but maybe it was just the pain in his head. When Dinevra came with another sweet cake, he decided his stomach was full enough.

Cimetra said, "I appreciate your help with the supplies, but I came to you for what you know, not what you could provide. We should talk about the Gahdir."

Marden leaned back. "Yes. Of course. You've seen the stone Gahdir already. The size and proportions are accurate. What would you like to know?"

"Really, all I need to know is how to kill them. But, I would also like to know the way they operate, their intelligence and any risks they will pose for my men."

Marden shook his head. "I'm not going to be much help, I'm afraid." His hands shook a little, so he pulled them off the table. "Are you certain you must destroy them? You know virtually nothing about them."

Her smile faded. "If you're sympathetic to the Gahdir, I may question my wisdom in coming to you, Marden. My orders and assignment are unequivocal."

Marden nodded. "My sympathies are reserved for those of us walking into the storm, Captain." He leaned forward and stood. "I better use the morning to secure our equipment and provisions. We can talk more on the way. What time do we leave?"

"When can you be ready?"

"Shortly after mid-day."

She rose from her seat and turned crisply to leave. "That's when we'll leave, then."

As he watched her go, he thought of the heavy price in lives the mission would cost. It was unlikely any of the soldiers, including Cimetra, would survive the next two days.

* * *

By early afternoon, the protectorate, sixty men led by one woman, marched single-file into the Coable desert with their pack camels trailing behind. The blowing sand and dust kept

their heads bent and veils lowered as they crossed the red rocks. If the wind strengthened, the veils would be useless and they would have to wrap their heads and hope the glass shields would work. Marden walked near the front of the line, close behind Cimetra.

He had to yell to be heard. "Once we cross this span, we'll be to the first arches. You could slow down and we'd still have plenty of time to make camp before dusk."

"I want to get to the far side of the arches and near the first dunes well before sunset. We'll need extra time to make camp in this wind." She did not look back.

Marden hurried to get closer so he would not have to yell as loud. "Listen. I know we did not have a chance to talk about the Gahdir much before."

"You made your reluctance toward my mission clear," she said. "I still need information, but I don't have time to determine your motives. Are you going to help me?"

Marden knew he needed to choose his words carefully. "With the little we were able to discuss this morning, I'm sure I gave an inaccurate impression of my motives. Trust me, I am willing to help all I can."

"Trust is only freely given by fools, Marden. And I'm no fool. Your sympathy toward the Gahdir was made clear. Start with that – explain why you care about them." She glanced back, but the veil concealed her expression.

Marden nodded. "My feelings toward the Gahdir are not nearly as deep as you might think." The wind gusted, nearly blowing his veil away, but he caught it and secured the ties under his chin. "However, I believe the Gahdir are not the source of death that the storms bring—there is something else out in the dunes."

"You're straying from the topic," she said.

"My apologies. I got caught in the storms the last time the twin moons aligned. I encountered the Gahdir in the desert. You were right about me having seen one up close before."

"Go on."

"I was caught in the storm unprepared. I thought to sketch the rocks with the sand blowing through and then paint the image while waiting out the storm in town." He struggled to catch his breath. "At the edge of the sand, where the red rock emerges from the dunes, I saw them. At least a half dozen Gahdir. They were communicating with each other – talking for lack of a better word. Any creature that intelligent cannot possibly be a mindless killing machine."

Cimetra walked next to Marden and her layers of thin robes whipped at his body. "I've never considered them to be *mindless* killing machines. That they're intelligent only makes them more dangerous."

"That might be possible, but I saw them talk to each other – behave civilly with each other. Also, they saw me and were close enough to attack. They didn't. They let me pass on my way to Briver Downs. If they wanted to kill me, I've no doubt they could have done so."

"Often, a man may walk past a bear or lion without being attacked," she said.

"But, lions and bears are not highly intelligent creatures."

"Just as likely, the Gahdir were on their way to stir up the plagues in the desert and didn't want to waste time hunting one man."

"Yes, but I was heading back to town and could have warned the people about the Gahdir," he said.

"You might have appeared too weak to survive the storm. Besides, they hardly seemed to be worried about secrecy. I've seen the size of them, their long hooked claws and maws to make wolves' jaws look like pups'."

The wind tore at their robes and veils, but neither huddled nor bent. Marden knew she would find an answer for everything he suggested. He also knew what he was about to say was

folly. "Is there any way you could observe them and determine for yourself whether they are a danger before you start killing them?"

Cimetra's voice cracked. "I can't afford to wager with my soldiers' lives. You said you weren't sympathetic to them, but that's clearly not true." She drew a long-bladed dagger and held it to Marden's chest. "You're in my custody until this mission is over. If you do anything to put my soldiers in danger, they will have leave to take whatever action they deem necessary."

Marden held up his hands. "I won't betray you or your men, Captain, but please consider setting up camp near the center of the arches. The conditions won't be as harsh there."

She shook her head. "Marden, I cannot trust your counsel when I question your motives. We will camp at the desert's edge."

"We will not survive the night. Death comes from beneath the sands. If we are not well clear of it..."

"I will organize our defenses myself." Her tone left no doubt that her mind was settled.

* * *

By the time the protectorate had crossed the red rock and reached the desert, the dunes were hardly visible because of all the blowing sand. Marden shivered and pulled his extra robe from the pack camel. Jorag Riben shadowed Marden, having been assigned to be his guardian by Captain Cimetra. Jorag was a tree of a man, tall with long arms and a strong grip, which Marden had learned when he didn't move quickly enough to suit Jorag.

Marden was almost amused by the sight of the soldiers scrambling to pitch tents in the harsh conditions. Had the stakes not been so high, he could have enjoyed the scene. Instead, he watched the sands when he could spare a moment from helping set up camp. Being held in custody did not relieve him of responsibility within camp. If Cimetra would listen, he could tell her that just before dark there should be a calm that would precede the fiercest winds. They could make camp then and still be settled in before nightfall. But, Cimetra would not accept that sort of counsel. Just as well, he thought. He would need the hour of calm to do what he planned.

Cimetra moved throughout the camp directing the placement of tents and weapon posts. Soldiers hammered in stakes to secure the swivel bases for huge cross-bows and racks of pikes and long spears. Groups of five men manned each post. The tents were placed in the center of the camp and the camels kept within the ring of tents.

Once the tents were almost all up, soldiers began delivering provisions from the packs to each tent. Cimetra approached Marden and Jorag. She faced Jorag and said, "You're in my post, Jorag, but Marden remains your primary responsibility."

Jorag's stern expression did not change. "Yes, Captain."

Cimetra turned to leave, but Marden caught her sleeve. "Treat me how you want, but you're making a mistake to ignore my advice."

She spun and whipped her veil away from her face. "I made my mistake in coming to you in the first place. I'm done making mistakes by you. Know this – if you obstruct my mission in any way, the repercussions will continue when we return to Briver Downs. If you survive that long." Her cheeks were red and her blue eyes intense. Marden chastised himself for even noticing the color of her stubborn eyes. When she was done staring him down, she gave Jorag additional authority to reprimand Marden for any suspect behavior.

While Jorag listened to Cimetra, Marden slipped a hand into his extra robe and was happy to find his brace of knives. Moments later, a guide line securing the windward corner of a tent near Marden mysteriously failed and the tent began to blow away. Soldiers rushed to catch

the tent and save the supplies that had been stored within. Among them was Jorag. When he turned to find his captive, Marden was gone.

"After him, Jorag!" Cimetra ordered. "Quint, go with Jorag – bring Marden back." Sand swirled on the strong winds.

The men ran back toward the red rock arches and were quickly gone from sight. Cimetra worked with the men to secure the loose tent and fix the cut lines. By the time camp was finally settled, the winds began to die down. Cimetra laughed and said to nobody in particular, "Now, that was a good joke." Cimetra was not a religious person, but if there was a god watching over the desert, he must hold a healthy appreciation for irony.

"Captain!" Chiap called from across camp. "There's something moving in the desert!"

* * *

Until the wind finally relented, Marden thought he might not be able to find the right arch. Then, the winds died almost at once. Marden stopped to catch his breath and cough out sand. With dusk about to give way to evening, the twin moons filled the sky above. Overhead, networks of arches formed a pattern that he recognized; the relatively small arch he sought was not far away.

As he was about to leave, he glanced over his shoulder. What he saw wrenched his stomach. Jorag and two other soldiers ran over the red rock toward him. He had a small lead on them, but their pace was much faster than he could manage. With a last cough, he ran toward the small arch.

Twice, Marden stumbled on the uneven rock, but was able to stay on his feet. His lungs burned and his breath came in rasping, sputtering gulps. Voices called out to him behind, ordering that he stop. The exhilaration of the sprint and fear that he would feel a spear between his shoulders at any time quickened his feet.

Marden was about a hundred paces from the arch when they overtook him. Disappointment flooded him, but at the same time he was relieved they hadn't killed him. Jorag's strong hands grasped his shoulders and pushed him to the ground. Pain burst through his face and blood poured from his smashed nose.

"If we had shackles, you'd be chained..." Jorag's deep voice trailed off.

Marden looked up and saw a huge Gahdir step through the arch as though appearing from the air itself. Marden saw that the moons had aligned. Then, more Gahdir came through. Soon, twenty behemoths marched toward them with green scaly hides glistening in the failing daylight.

Marden saw Jorag grip his spear to throw it. "No!" Marden yelled.

* * *

Cimetra ran to Chiap and looked out into the desert.

"What did you see?" she asked.

"It was right there." He pointed. "A mound of sand shifted."

Cimetra watched the desert a while longer, but nothing moved.

"Over here, Captain!" Another soldier called out on the far side of camp.

"You better not be playing games, men." Cimetra ran back to the side of camp she had just left.

"No, Captain, look," Wesden, a young, red haired soldier said.

This time, she saw the mound of sand moving. The mound vibrated intermittently for a wile, then stopped. Soon, other mounds of sand moved. "Soldiers, to your posts!"

The sand mound Wesden had pointed out vibrated again. Sand sputtered into the air in small puffs and something emerged. A long-bodied creature the size of a weasel, with countless legs on its underbelly, rolled down the dune and righted itself. At once, it glided over the sand toward the arches and in the direction of camp. Then, more of the caterpillar-like creatures burst from the sand. They all moved toward the Bloodlands.

"Cut them down!" Cimetra said.

The soldiers pulled out swords and spears and maneuvered into the desert in packs. Cimetra noticed the smell even before the first creature was cut in two by Chiap. The air smelled rancid. After the first creature was split, the odor was almost overpowering. When more were cut down, the soldiers could hardly bear the stench. Still, the conflict seemed easily managed at first.

Then, Wesden pointed out that one of the severed bodies was moving again. It seemed to have sealed its own wound and was now attacking him. He swung his sword at the little beast, but it bounded forward, ahead of the blade. Wesden screamed out as it attached itself to his leg. Another soldier split the beast again, but the part attached to Wesden's leg held fast and bored into his flesh. He fell to the ground, writhing and pulling at the creature.

More creatures came toward the soldiers.

"Chiap, help Wesden! Everyone pull back to camp!" Cimetra ordered.

By the time they got back to camp, two of the camels were down and their bodies seemed to ripple with the creatures boring into their flesh. One soldier vomited. Cimetra gave specific orders, and they formed tight ranks to ward off the creatures. They learned the creatures could be killed if inflicted with enough trauma, but the brownish blood stunk horribly. Several soldiers were dispatched to eliminate the creatures attacking the camels. Chiap was one of them.

He called out to Cimetra, "Captain! They disappear into the sand after they've fed on flesh!"

"Watch the sand and if they come back, kill them," she said.

The soldiers fought off the creatures until their arms ached from swinging weapons. They tried taking turns, but found that they needed nearly all of their number to fend off the creatures. Time quickly became their enemy. More soldiers sickened as the odor became oppressive.

Then, the wind began to blow again, and it became hard to see the creatures and fight them off. Soldiers started falling more frequently and a growing sense of doom pervaded the camp.

"Captain, over here."

Cimetra turned and slipped out of ranks to attend her soldier. "What is it?"

Jarrin pointed to the horizon. As he did, two of the small creatures bored into his legs, bringing him to his knees at once. She dropped and carved the little beasts out before they could penetrate deeply. She looked up and saw huge forms charging through the blowing sand. *So this is the death the desert promised*, she thought.

Dozens of Gahdir charged toward them, bounding over rock and across the sand. Two of them carried things over their shoulders that looked like bags of flour.

Cimetra noticed the things on their shoulders were men. Her men. "Daric, Kluft and Habel, man the crossbows – fire on the Gahdir!"

The soldiers, to their credit, did as they were ordered, but only Habel made it to the crossbow. The others were brought down by the small creatures. Before Habel could fire,

however, the Gahdir were upon them.

Before the Gahdir reached the men, several of them dug into large belt sacks and drew out handfuls of tiny crystals. Even the tiny creatures that had attacked the soldiers without fear fled before them. The Gahdir moved with the grace of a dance around the camp. Some spread the crystals over the sand and others ripped through the little creatures with their long claws. Those creatures that the crystals hit shrieked and shriveled almost at once.

Cimetra just stood and watched. Only a couple of the soldiers had tried to engage the Gahdir, but the Gahdir avoided the blades and moved about their business of attacking the creatures. When the camp was secured, Cimetra noticed that the men returned by the Gahdir were unharmed.

Marden finally approached camp, having trailed after the Gahdir.

Now, most of the Gahdir continued to pursue the creatures across the desert, but one enormous Gahdir remained behind. It approached Cimetra and Marden. "The crystals will ward the Dihalisks from your camp, but they will also harm you if you touch them. Proceed with caution when you leave in the morning."

Cimetra seemed too stunned to speak, so Marden offered his sincere thanks.

The Gahdir almost seemed to smile, but its face was so un-human that Cimetra could not tell.

Cimetra finally found her voice, "Dihalisks? How do you know of these creatures, and how is it you know our language?"

The Gahdir laughed, or at least made a sound Cimetra hoped was a laugh. "I don't speak your language, but you speak ours. Dihalisk is from an older language meaning 'the devil's curse' and we've known of their kind for centuries." He reached into his belt pouch and withdrew a large flask. "Make sure all of your soldiers drink this water or the disease of the Dihalisk will claim your lives yet."

Cimetra started to cry. "Are you gods?"

The laugh was even louder. "No, but we come to do their bidding. The Evil One exerted too much influence by sending the Dihalisks to this desert. That violation allowed the gods the freedom to send us to protect their children."

Her tears ran freely. "I owe you an apology."

"It is not you, but he who sent you that owes the apology. Marden explained your mission. I warn you, however, use caution in reporting to your duke. The Evil One holds sway in that heart."

As the wind came up again, the Gahdir slipped away into the desert.

The End

The Nahi

By D. J. R.

Asha raised his eyes to the mirror. He did not see himself, but the past reflected in his eyes.

A small child, awoken by a stifled scream and newly broken glass, rises from bed and peeks out of his doorway. Down the hall his mother stands, hands at her sides, silhouetted by the bathroom light. Curious, he pads across the floor, holding his favorite noshpet, which wiggles in his grip and licks his chin with a warm, wet slurp. He smiles. His mother kneels, back still to him. He peeks over her shoulder.

Asha dropped his eyes from the mirror, but the memory continued to flood his thoughts. He backed out of the bathroom and fell, sitting, onto his bed. Tears threatened to break his hold, but he would not let them. He put his hands to his head, trying to stop the memory. It came.

"No!" his father yells, backing further into the corner between the tub and wall. "Get him away from me."

The boy holds the noshpet close, trying to hide, instinctively moving toward his mother. She is crying and stares at him for a moment in shock before she takes him into her arms, holding him close. She turns his head away, but he wants to see; he wants to understand why papa is angry. Why doesn't papa want him? Was he bad that day? What has he done?

He fights his mother's hands, eyes falling on dark-amber liquid spattered on the floor. He knows that color. It leaks out of his scrapes when he falls.

His father lunges forward, half slipping on the dark-amber liquid. The bathroom light reflects off the shattered mirror, a piece of which is in his hands.

"Get him away from me…now! Both of you get away!"

"Halri," his mother pleads, "don't, don't do this. You don't know if…"

"Do as I say, Margret." His father holds the shard just above his neck line. Tears are falling from his eyes. He whispers, "They are already on their way. The word has been given." He lowers the shard of mirror away from him for a moment. "You must take him to your Humanitarians. The colony is the only place he will be safe."

His mother is holding him so tight it almost hurts. She's shaking her head. "Halri," her pleading voice whispers.

The bathroom light reflects in his eyes as the mirror shard moves. He can't fight free of his mother's hands. They're pushing his head away, toward his room, and she is screaming wordlessly. He doesn't understand what's going on. His mother is standing with him in her arms. They are going down the hallway. They are leaving papa. He was hurt. Why is mama leaving

papa?

The boy fights for a last look to see a pool of dark-amber inching across the bathroom floor.

Asha stared across the room and out the window as the memory receded. He understood now, thirty Ilsha years later. He understood all too well. Outside, the evening sky began to take over the daylight. Two planets hovered in the darkening sky, seemingly above their joint moon, Ilsha. His prison of thirty years, only his watchers didn't like to call it that.

He stood and moved to the window, observing the variety that streamed below. The bright colors of the rycion skin contrasted sharply with the desert background of Ilsha. Intermixed with the enforced residents were their warders in uniforms of silver and black.

He mentally brushed away where the memory had been. His father had spoken rightly. The Humanitarians had protected him and his mother when the 'extermination' had begun. But the irony of their name remained to mock him. He was a hybrid—not human and not rycion, yet both. And thus he could never belong to either.

He watched his fellow colony inmates walk by, going about their lives. They were allowed to live a relatively normal existence. Asha himself was learning the physics of space travel, though he would never be allowed to go anywhere. The memory affected his psyche and he sighed tiredly. Such things were part of his rycion heritage, but his were mild in comparison. Rycions were known to actually re-live memories so vividly that any wounds incurred physically manifested themselves to a small extent on their bodies.

Soft harp music began to play in his room and a blue light flashed beside his com screen. He walked over to it and pushed 'answer'.

Manny smiled at him.

"Asha! Good, I caught you before you left. I found something very interesting. I've been going over Earth's history and…"

"Tek, are you crazy?" Asha said, sitting down, eyes wide. If their warders heard them use any name but their 'call name', they would be punished severely. 'Accidents' had happened to them for lesser infractions. Asha knew, though, that it was just one more way to keep them under control.

"Relax." Manny waved a pale, tan hand into the air before leaning over and speaking in a low voice. "I've blocked the line from intruders. The warders will think it's another glitch in the system. Those bugs are so annoying." He winked. "Anyway, as I was saying." Manny paused for a moment, concern flashing across his face. "You look exhausted." Then he nodded to himself "Another recall episode. Well, this should get your mind going in a different direction. I've been going over Earth's history and I found an article you've really got to read. Remember the obscure 'Invisible Sun' theory and all those reports of a Chaos Cult? Well….you'll see. Curious yet? How soon can you come down?"

Asha shook his head, half laughing at himself for even trying to open his mouth to get a word in edgewise. Manny was always crazy enthusiastic with his wild ideas, but it was part of what Asha liked about him.

"Yes, immensely, and I'm working until ten. I'll be there after that."

"Make it eleven. You'll have to wait an extra hour, just for that. Out."

The com screen went black. Asha stared at it for a moment with a crooked smile before standing and glancing at the bathroom. He decided to skip a wash-up before work, and instead gathered his notebook and extra disks.

News reports of the Chaos Cult had increased of late—they were crazies that he probably would never have to worry about. Humans who decided to kill as many others as they could in the name of mercy with the belief that Chaos was on its way to rule the universe. Stuffing all of

his things he'd gathered in a bag, he walked out the door, musing on what Manny had said.

* * *

Mibahi awoke, damp with sweat and breathing heavily. He shuddered as the memory of the dream continued to haunt him when he stood and turned on the light. His room was plain and simple, with two desks, a lamp, a bed and a cluttershelf. The clock blinked a yellow light, telling him it was not quite light outside.

He still had time to sleep, but he knew he could not go back to sleep. He couldn't close his eyes without seeing horror. He sat back down on his bed and wrapped his blankets around himself, forcing his breathing to calm. A kindly warder had once taught a meditation class, which had often soothed him and helped him when recall episodes occurred.

His dreams had gotten worse of late. When he was younger, and had first arrived on Ilsha, they had terrified him. Now he just wanted to understand what they meant.

He switched his window to ambient view and watched as the scenery shifted between autumn gold and summer green, between endless plateaus and boundless ocean. Images of Tamleck and alien environments he guessed were from Earth came and went. He'd never been to Earth, but thought it quite beautiful, a different sort of beauty from Tamleck.

Then, as it often did, images of his dream began to appear before him. He knew the window was not showing them, but that his mind was re-creating them in front of him. He stared stolidly at the window screen, facing each picture of horror, one by one. It was the only way he would be able to return to sleep.

He could hear his old meditation instructor speaking to him from his memories.

"What do you see?"

At first he'd been afraid to answer her, afraid she'd think him crazy and do to him what had been done to his parents. But now he knew and answered her aloud, though she was no longer there to hear him.

"Red. Amber. The blood of two races. As planets around the sun they sit. Alone they burst and spatter, and disappear, all but a few drops, into the vastness of space."

"And together?" her voice ghosted in his ear.

He cocked his head. "They remain whole, a few drops shed to disappear into nothingness."

The image shifted and he tensed.

"Remember, you are the master of your dreams."

Mibahi stared at the image, fighting down his fear and the sense of horror that rose with them, and embracing the scene before him, knowing the emotions had no control over him at that moment.

"What do you see?"

"Shadow swallows up the light. Marbles spill from a pouch and bounce around, spinning, spread apart on a floor of rainbow stone. Two turn to gas and one to ice. A woman is pushed from a bridge, a child falls into a vast ocean of fire, and keeps falling even after the water swallows him. And…a grain of sand falls from the sky."

"How do you feel?" he could hear his instructor ask.

"The woman pushed from the bridge for some reason is more frightening than the disappearing light and the drowning child."

"What does your logic tell you?"

Mibahi watched the images of his dream fade to be replaced by quiescent scenes. He sighed into his empty room and answered the lingering question of his instructor. "I still don't

know what much of it means, but I'm now more certain than ever that we are the Nahi, and that time is running out."

* * *

Commander Albot "Hawk" Vandee stood on his balcony overlooking the twin planets Arlon and Katarn. He closed his eyes and breathed in the ship's air, which had the smell of an old pine forest. It was his favorite, reminding him of his training days on Earth, before he had been assigned to Interplanetary Affairs. For a moment, and just a moment, it took his mind off his next task- informing Lieutenants Tanner and Donnet of their new duties on Ilsha.

He opened his eyes, adjusting to the disorientation by focusing on the small white moon Arlon and Katarn shared- Ilsha. There were many landers who lost their lunch on such balconies for, to those who had never been on a spaceship, never had the experience of interplanetary travel, it appeared he stood out in the middle of nowhere, on nothing.

The light sound of wind chimes echoed through his office.

"Lieutenants Tanner and Donnet reporting, sir," said a voice over the intercom.

Hawk brought his wrist up, and pressed a blue button on his wireless communication link. "Enter, lieutenants," he said into his wicomli.

He remained with his back to the door, listening as the entry chime sounded when one of the lieutenants swiped his hand in front of the access panel. Once he heard the door click shut, Hawk turned on his heel to face the two.

Both stood straight in well-pressed, silver and black uniforms of the galaxy patrol. Tanner, Hawk noticed, looked a little uneasy, shifting his weight slightly from foot to foot and staring, almost desperately, at him. Donnet on the other hand confidently returned Hawk's scrutiny.

Presently, Hawk stepped into the room, the balcony disappearing as he did so, becoming a wall with a small window. Tanner's countenance visibly relaxed. Hawk mentally nodded to himself. The reports he'd received on Tanner were correct- Tanner was more of a lander, and a fresh recruit from Mars. Donnet, a spacer, born and raised in space, would likely not care for his new duties. Yes, the two of them would be a good choice.

"At ease, gentlemen. Please sit." Hawk walked over to his desk and motioned the two to take up residence on one of the three plush chairs. Tanner sat, but Donnet chose to stand.

"You have our new duties, Commander?" Donnet asked. His face remained without expression.

Hawk nodded, smiling. Donnet was sharp. It wasn't every time that subordinates were called into the commander's office just to be given their assignments.

"You are aware of the Act of 2230?"

Donnet blinked and his forehead furrowed slightly. Tanner cocked his head, his short-cropped blond hair falling to one side, eyes shifting to one corner of the room. Hawk waited.

It took a moment before Tanner's eyes sought Hawk's out, confusion plain on his face. "It established an avoidance neutral-space agreement in three separate regions of various outer territories, and was an amendment to the Peace Pact with the…the rycions." The way Tanner spat out the word made his view of the rycions clear. Hawk had expected this. It had only been fifty years since the Peace Pact, and it was still an uneasy peace. Most Martians hated the rycions. Mars and the outposts on two of Jupiter's moons were the easiest and most vulnerable settlements when the trouble between the rycions and humanity began.

Donnet was frowning. "We are in one of those regions," he stated.

Tanner sat up straighter and Hawk saw an excited gleam in his eye. "Does our assignment

have to do with these forbidden zones?" he asked.

Hawk remained impassive, but answered him. "As a matter of fact, yes. Now why, do you suppose, were they established?"

Donnet and Tanner side-glanced at each other. Hawk knew why. They had learned as they should from the tutorials during their schooling, but as with most students, they had never looked any deeper into the accords than to memorize a few important lines here and there. They knew names and dates, but never bothered about reasons, accepting what was supplied to them.

It wasn't an easy question. Neither was the answer very simple. He gave them a small while to ponder it before sitting down on his chair behind his desk, at his ease. He had their attention.

"I suppose you know of the Outrage of 2186?" Hawk eyed them both, but recalled the last-ditch effort to save a faltering amnesty between two species.

"The development of interbreeding technology, allowing human-rycion….relations," Donnet said, tapping his finger to his cheek and calling attention to unshaven stubble. A scowl fell over Tanner's youthful face with Donnet's words.

"The Outrage, as it came to be called, eventually led to an 'amendment agenda' by both humans and rycion governments."

"Extermination of the *tainted*," Tanner supplied.

Hawk relaxed further back into his chair. "Not quite."

Donnet's gaze was far away as he slowly sank into a nearby seat, and Tanner's eyes widened.

"They were re-located to those three regions, weren't they?" Donnet said, focusing his eyes back on Hawk.

Tanner jerked his head in Donnet's direction, then quickly returned it to attention. Hawk gave a satisfied grunt, and leaned forward. Donnet was a keen one, and patient. He just might balance out Tanner.

"There are various levels of knowledge on this subject, but what I tell you now has to do with your new duties. In the early years following the Outrage, internment colonies were established because of the threat of war. As the moods changed, so did the laws and regulations, but the fact remained that many persons of power and authority were, and are, linked to the progeny that evolved from the technology, either directly or indirectly. This prompted a close watch by both species, not to mention genocidal sentiments. It is true that many were hunted down and killed, torn from their parents or murdered while they slept. In some cases by their own families."

Tanner's mouth hung open a degree, while Donnet remained thoughtfully attentive. Hawk continued, alternating his gaze between one and the other.

"Since the Peace Pact, the various outlying regions have been governed by either humans or rycions. You will be briefed for the next week or so on the protocols involving the hybrids, accepted behaviors for you and them, and other general instructions."

Tanner's mouth shut with a snap; his Martian-red tinted cheeks remained tense.

"What exactly is our duty assignment?" Donnet asked, his gaze level with Hawk's.

"Sergeant Jones is going into retirement and Lieutenant-Captain Kerell is being transferred to the spaceship *Dasher*. They were warders of the Ilsha colony. You will be taking the place of others who are moving up to their positions. Your main duties will be to assist in overseeing the technical operations on the satellite station that orbits Ilsha, and keeping the peace." Hawk set his elbows on his desk, placed his fingertips together, spread apart, and tapped them against his lips.

Tanner opened his mouth to speak, but Donnet beat him to words. "We could've been ordered to the satellite via our wicomli's and instructed once there. Why else were we called here?"

Hawk dropped his hands to his desk, and resisted the urge to bark out a laugh. By all the pesky space-dust, Donnet had an observant mind.

"There's been a…mishap on Ilsha. A hybrid died. You will be sent planet-side for a cursory investigation. One is always required under these circumstances. Your findings are to be reported to me." The last thing he needed was the tenuous peace between the species to be broken by reports of incompetent warders and ill-treated hybrids. They were the shame of both species, and yet, Hawk knew, they had allowed for the Peace Pact and were the reason the war had fallen to a halt.

* * *

"Mah-nee! Mah-nee!" a hysteric voice screamed just beyond the doorway. Teal blue skin covered in gray dress, violet eyes, large and leaking tears, and distraught face framed by wisps of long, dark-purple hair struggled with more somber-toned figures, one having rust-colored skin and short, sienna hair, the other dressed in green, and appearing human.

Lieutenant Amberl Donnet felt a chill down the back of his neck as the human-appearing one glared coldly at him with liquid-silver eyes. Hybrids. The exotic ones he could deal with- it was those resembling humanity that unnerved him. So like him and yet so alien. Amberl Donnet scratched at the stubble on his cheek while his partner, Lieutenant Nase Tanner, scowled at the unfolding scene.

"Get…it…get… them away!" Tanner barked to the drones standing by the door. Mentally, Amberl shook his head. Tanner was having trouble dealing with the hybrids. Being from Mars had made him especially prejudiced, but not without reason. Of course, three universal weeks ago, both he and Tanner had been living in ignorant bliss. The drones, the lowest ranks in the galaxy patrol, pushed the gathering crowd back and barred the entryway to the door. Meanwhile, another bluish hybrid had arrived, and together the three hybrids managed to drag the weeping one away.

The gravity of Ilsha weighed heavily on Amberl as he turned his attention once more to the body on the floor. The second dead hybrid on the moon. It lay slumped, on one side, appearing asleep, a broken 'learner' in one hand. Their first investigation had found suicide, clear-cut. Security cameras showed the hybrid tightening the noose itself.

Amberl knelt down slowly, attempting to ignore the light scent of burnt flesh as he neared the corpse, now a drab brown. It was one of those humanish hybrids, which stirred both pity and disgust in his mind. Disgust that he actually associated the dead hybrid with a dead human.

"*Tainted* fool electrocuted himself," Tanner said from behind Amberl.

"So it would appear," Amberl answered, glowering for a moment at Tanner's casual use of 'tainted' before looking around for some gloves to remove the 'learner' from the corpse's hand. The screen was stuck on a dull picture of a young man with a moustache and beard- a human. Underneath the picture was written: 'Dr. Howard'. Amberl leaned closer to see it was a replica of an old news report. The title read: 'Famed Astronomer Howard Disappears Among the Stars.' Amberl recalled the event vaguely, having only heard about it from his parents, who were physics nuts. Howard was a physics savant, but people began to believe he'd gone from genius to madness in his obsession over the Invisible Sun. He wrinkled his nose at the stench from below him and sat back on his heels, motioning one of the drones over.

"Officer…Malch," Amberl said, when he could read the badge on the drone's gold and black uniform. "Have one of our programmers see what they can make of this 'learner' will you?"

"Yeser," the drone said and went about putting on a set of gloves and removing the small, rectangular, super-computer. Amberl had never seen one with a split coverlet, but once turned on it carried enough current to fry an egg in two seconds, and a brain in ten.

"You're not seriously considering a non-accident, are you?" Tanner asked, disbelief tingeing his haughty voice.

Amberl stood, walking toward a three-paned holo-window. The inside rooms like the recently deceased's didn't have the luxury of real windows. The stench abated as he moved away.

"I'm doing my job, Tanner. You plan on being stuck here till retirement?"

The window showed a spiraling galaxy and changed to Earth's solar system and star pattern when Amberl approached. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Tanner shrug.

"Oh, I think I could handle that."

Amberl watched Tanner suspiciously. He kept his voice quiet. "You hate the hybrids."

Tanner's eyes narrowed and an oily smile appeared on his face. "You're the one who said to view this as an opportunity."

A small, sick feeling settled itself in the pit of Amberl's stomach. Tanner had been near outraged when Commander Hawk had first pounced their assignment on them. For his part, Amberl had been startled to say the least. Watching over a colony of hybrids. He thought he knew where Tanner's motives lay. Tanner would love any chance to see the hybrids suffer. What made Amberl's stomach turn was that, on some level, he felt the same way Tanner did.

* * *

Sajora Sadeev Sabim. That was her name a long, long time ago when she had a home, a family, a past. But on Ilsha she was simply Nom. Every hybrid on Ilsha had a simple name, a 'call name'. She suspected it was the best their wards could do to dehumanize them without resorting to numbers. Prisoners were numbers, and their keepers attempted to make it quite clear that they were not prisoners, even though they could not leave. Sajora stared across the wide expanse of the barren moon and tried not to think of her earlier life. The memories were just too painful, and clear besides. Part of her rycion heritage.

Beside her Anii wailed and fell to her knees.

"Why? Why do they do this to us? Why, why, why, why, why?" Anii pounded her sorrow at the ground, her tears streaming. Dirt covered her teal fists.

"Tol," Mibahi said, for that was Anii's name on Ilsha. He squatted across from her and placed his hand on her shoulder. His rust-colored skin contrasted with her pale gray blouse. He placed his forehead to hers and her sobbing quieted. A wind blew, stirring up dry dust and bringing out a cough from the man standing silently beside the only living thing in the graveyard- an old Teshka tree, a present from an earlier time to the *tainted.*

"Do try to hurry," the man said, dusting off his silver and black uniform. Sajora didn't know his name, but the badge he wore said Donnet. Though sun struck the shining buttons on Donnet's jacket, it brought no glaring desert heat with it. That just didn't happen on Ilsha. It was always the same, cold temperature, thanks to the ASD, the atmospheric shielding device.

Sajora turned her glare on Kamro, who gave her a grim smile. He would know her glare was not meant for him. Beside Kamro, Elura frowned and Tashki stared at the ground. None of them even glanced in the direction of the cloth-covered body that had been Anii's brother.

Soon enough the deed was done and Sajora stood with her fellow exiles beside the grave.

Anii remained sitting and staring at the newly turned earth. No ritual was allowed for one of the tainted, no words- they had no souls. They were simply man's creation. Or so that is what the humans and the rycions wanted to believe. Sajora stole a glance at the investigator. Donnet frowned at the horizon and shifted uncomfortably. The day grew short. Colors reminding Sajora of an older sky began fill it and long shadows fell. Finally, one by one, the exiles left until only Sajora, Anii and Mibahi remained.

High above, two large satellites hung in orbit above the moon. One always reminded Sajora of a blue ice-pearl while the other shone like a blue-brown marble. She gazed up as the darkening day revealed them both more clearly. She daydreamed about what a beautiful place it would be. Just to leave, just to go there. Any place not flat and empty like Ilsha. A cough interrupted her thoughts. She frowned as she heard Donnet shifting behind her.

"Come to the waiting room when you are finished."

It was a clear-cut order that spared no breath. No word passed between the three of them, but the agreement was there. When Donnet had gone, Anii cursed the wind.

"I hate them." A fierce anger lay in her voice. Sajora blinked to hear such harshness from Anii.

"Pity them instead," Mibahi said, not taking his eyes off the distance.

Anii's head jerked up in his direction. Even in the darkness, Sajora could see her eyes widen. "Pity?" Anii spat. "You want me to pity them? They killed my brother." Anii was on her feet, nose to nose with Mibahi. He let her anger take its course and remained unmovable as a boulder. There wasn't much, in Sajora's experience, that perturbed Mibahi.

"Why should I believe you?" Anii continued, stalking back and forth in front of the grave, hands at her side in a fist. "You say that we are the *Nahi*, the hope. We are accorded less than people. I had a home. I *had* a family." Her tears flowed again.

"We all had a family," Sajora said, letting the bitterness in her heart ooze into her words.

Anii turned her baleful eyes Sajora's way. "Shut-em, Nom."

Sajora stiffened, but said nothing. In any other case she would've taken it as an insult. As it was, she knew it was Anii's grief that was doing the talking.

"Anii," Mibahi gently chastised. Anii's fierce expression wilted as she turned away, bringing her hand to her face. She took a deep breath, and the sobs that had begun to come up instead subsided.

Sajora stared at the mound of dirt, Manny's grave. She'd always tried to avoid talking of those who died or who seemed forever gone. There was just too much pain to be had with no relief but tears. Tears did her no good.

The three of them stood there for a moment in silence before Anii turned toward Sajora.

"Sajora, I—"

"We'd best return," Sajora cut in, forestalling what she believed to be Anii's apology. It had become the lowest insult for them to call each other by their designated 'call name'.

Mibahi sighed and nodded.

"How much longer?" Anii asked.

It was becoming too dark to see Mibahi's expression, but Sajora guessed he was frowning in thought. He often did so.

"I cannot be certain, but it seems to me in a couple of weeks it will all begin."

Sajora turned and began walking back toward their city. Mibahi followed a step behind. Ever since he'd arrived, Mibahi had his dreams, his nightmares. In them he saw chaos and death for both humans and rycions. And he said they, the tainted halflings of human and rycion blood, were the hope. The Nahi.

* * *

Dr. James T. Howard drew a ragged breath as he gazed out of his lodgings on Tamleck, the rycion's home planet. He coughed violently for a moment, blood spattering onto the starmap he studied. Taking a cloth, he wiped away the blood drops from the flat table-screen. The starmap wavered, not sure what his swipe of the screen indicated.

A flickering sunlight filtered through the windows. The Tamleckian sunlight's wavelength varied so much that adaptation had led to different skin tones based on regional habitats. As a human, one of the few still left on Tamleck, he'd been accorded special accommodations to make the sunlight appear more like Earth's.

Soft bells announced a caller. James stood, placing a hand on his chair to steady himself for a moment, and moved to answer the door. He waved his hand in front of the recognition panel and the door clicked open.

"Doctor Howard," Miga said, pushing the door all the way open and entering the room. He paused and squinted at James for a moment. "Are you well? Is cough bothering you again?" His Earth-speech was heavily accented.

James was surprised. It wasn't often Miga spoke Earth-speech. It took James a moment to remember how to respond; he'd been speaking Tamleckian so long. Instead of answering, though, he waved his hand dismissively.

"What brings you to bother old human in middle of day?" James asked in broken Earth-speak. His memory was a little fuzzy.

Miga glanced out the window for a moment. "The darkness comes soon. Still Concergate no listens."

James sighed, which brought on another cough. He slumped onto his bed. When the bout had subsided, he sat up straight, wiping his face with the cloth. Fifty years ago he had predicted its coming, but no one wanted to believe. It just didn't happen to 'them'. But the darkness was coming. Apparently Miga and his people hadn't had any luck convincing the Tamleckian governments, their Concergate, about the impending threat.

"Solar Whispers," Miga snorted. "That what they called it." One bright blue hand scratched the other and then rubbed where it had scratched. James noticed the pattern. Miga had been too long gone from a moisturizing source. His waxy skin was drying out. Unlike humans, the rycions' skin required a bath in their world's oily water, or the application of a similar substance, at least once a month, as a new, moisture-holding skincoat formed. Without it, their skin dried out, cracked, and peeled, leaving raw bleeding wounds that would eventually lead to their death. From the looks of it, Miga was in need of a re-moisturizing.

Solar Whispers. James scowled. His finding was no artifact of data. Violently, he began to cough again. It was hard to draw breath. Miga leaned toward him, anxious. Just then the sound of soft bells tinkled and James sensed the presence of a third person.

"Traitor. It's true then. You and the Milshee's are harboring a red-blooded wet-skin," he heard the voice of the third person say as his cough subsided for a moment. James looked up to see another Tamleckian, this one a dusty-orange, staring at him with reddish-brown eyes.

"No matter," he continued. "This abomination ends now."

James saw Miga jerk back and fall, but could not tell why. He turned his head to look at the newcomer and was snatched into a powerful, squeezing grip. Seventy years. Seventy good years, and now no one would know. James hoped the Milshee would somehow convince the Concergate to listen, that the Darklight group he'd started back on Lunar Colony would convince

Earth's solar-system leaders. He could hardly breathe, though he kicked and pulled. Black spots appeared in his vision. At least, he would not be there to see the end. He thought once more of the beautiful Earth before all colors faded.

* * *

In the darkness of space an object tumbled, bending the light from countless stars around it. Something had sent it on its random course, and that course took it through the Milky Way galaxy.

It wasn't entirely Dr. Howard's fault that he'd miscalculated the size of the object. After all, it must've been hard for beings smaller than atoms- from a galaxy's perspective- to imagine the enormity of such a thing. It's no wonder Dr. Howard was only able to calculate what was, at that time, the front section of the object, which, if viewed from the right perspective, did seem to have the mass of a sun.

Large, condensed, heavenly bodies shuddered, gas and solid alike, pulled from their trudging, routine dances around each other into violent discord, forced onto new paths. Thus began a drastic change in what was once the way of things for the Milky Way. It was even said that, at the moments following the object's pass through the galaxy, the sound of the event traveled in shockwaves to the farthest expanding galaxies. A sound unlike any other, but as heart-stopping as that audible click after stepping on a mine left in an empty, long-forgotten battlefield, during the noiseless period before a storm, where no animal sounds nor even the wind can be heard.

* * *

Amberl Donnet rubbed his eyes and tried to focus on the report in front of him. 'Lerner' coverlets just did not break by accident. There was a purpose behind the hybrid's murder and Amberl had yet to figure out what it was. All he knew was that the hybrid known as 'Tek' was researching an old physicist and the Chaos Cult. Amberl had heard of the cult, and had seen some action with them. That was one reason he and Tanner had gotten the Ilsha assignment. They'd helped unearth and undermine a plot of the more radical wing of the cult on Space-station Io to collide the station with its parent moon.

The light sound of a violin striking a chord announced a visitor. Amberl was about to speak into his wicomli when the door opened and a haggard drone rushed inside, the door sliding shut behind him. Amberl was on his feet in an instant, disrupter gun in hand.

"We've got to go. Now," the drone said.

Amberl leveled his gaze at the drone, but did not move. The murder investigations had put him on edge, and it hadn't been hard to notice that some of the hybrids carried the same animosity toward him as Tanner did toward them. One other thing he'd noticed since arriving on Ilsha was that there were also human sympathizers among the hybrids.

"You realize that barging in on a superior officer can be considered insubordination?" he asked, noting the name on the drone's uniform. Malch. Where had he seen it before?

Malch stood at attention and cleared his throat. "Sir, it would be in your best interest to follow me immediately. I don't have time to explain, just convey urgency." Then he added almost as an afterthought, "The shuttle will not leave without your approval."

Amberl lowered his gun, but did not relax his guard. Something drastic must have been occurring for a drone to forgo all protocols. Protocols kept people alive, and the penalty for

insubordination was much worse than baby-sitting duty on Ilsha. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed his com screen light blinking.

"Don't, sir. If you want to live, don't, sir," said Malch, eyeing first him, then the com light.

Amberl could hardly believe his ears. The drone was threatening him? Too stunned for a moment to do anything, he simply stared at Malch, growing more on edge. The drone's wicomli gave a soft beep. Before Amberl could say anything, Malch answered.

A voice on the other end started spouting out a language Amberl recognized as Tamleckian. Malch answered in kind, slowly, and stared at him the whole time. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end. Something was so wrong he could hardly explain it away in a rational sense. Being a spacer, such feelings only came when there was a threat to the station or ship. Here, on land, was an insubordinate drone, addressing him in a manner of respect, offering no apparent threat of weapon, yet urging him to leave else face death.

In that moment he made up his mind. He left the com screen blinking and walked toward the drone. He remembered now where he'd seen Malch. The hybrid's murder scene. "I always ask questions after," he said to Malch as a way of warning him. Malch nodded and Amberl followed him out.

The way to the shuttle port was calm. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, though he could sense tension in the air in some spots. Malch said nothing as they left and rode to the shuttle port. Once there, he followed Malch through the terminal and security to a far port where Shuttle Thirteen was docked.

"You're cleared for departure to Orbiter Iris, Lieutenant Donnet. I just need your code on these passage forms, sir," the attendant said.

Amberl pressed his thumb onto the square white box, side-glancing at Malch, who did the same for his clearance forms. Only officers could authorize departure from Ilsha. It was tightly regulated so that no hybrid could escape, which was why, when he succeeded Malch on entering the shuttle, he almost set off his disrupter gun.

The door to the shuttle closed, and Amberl glared down the point of his disrupter gun at Malch, who stood, arms out, in front of a group of hybrids. Three females and four male hybrids. One male hybrid with turquoise skin made a move toward a com screen.

"Don't," Amberl warned.

"I believe this will make things clearer, Warder," the male said, his hand falling to the armrest of one of the shuttle chairs. The com screen came to life. Amberl recognized Commander Hawk's office.

"This is live, and no, this is no joke," the male hybrid said, staring at the screen. His voice was flat, and dripping with distain, but it held the ring of truth. "Something Manny taught me before…"

One of the girl hybrids turned away and sat on one of the chairs. Another went to her and laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Sir, there's real trouble. We have to leave, now. Lieutenant Tanner's lost it." Amberl's gaze flicked to Malch. "He's one of the ringleaders of the Chaos Cult."

For the second time in one day, Amberl felt like the world had lost its mind. Tanner a member of that cult. Impossible. They'd been together in ridding Space-station Io of the cult. But just as quickly things began to fall in place. How easily they'd been able to get information about the plans, how the cult seemed to know their moves, yet how the galaxy patrol, especially his and Tanner's group, had been able to stay one step ahead. No. Malch, the *tainted* sympathizer, was likely just trying to get into his head to free the hybrids.

Beneath him, he felt the shuttle begin to move. On the com screen, Commander "Hawk"

Vandee came into view. He was walking from the balcony to his desk and frowning at a reporter he held in his hands. Wind chimes sounded.

* * *

Hawk scowled at the sound of the wind chimes. Unexpected company was never good in his experience. He sighed and wondered what new problems his secretary was going to hand to him now.

"Enter," he said into his wicomli.

For a moment his mind didn't comprehend what he was seeing. Instead of his secretary, in walked a group of galaxy patrolmen, one smirking tawny-haired youth in front. The moment passed and his shrewd eyes squinted at the former lieutenant as he assessed the situation. He could either act the idiot and demand answers, or keep calm and look for the best way out of the situation.

"Tanner," he said, moving to take a seat in his chair. "I see you've found some friends. What can I do for you today? Disgruntled about your new assignment I suppose. I see Donnet had the common sense to stay clear of this mess."

Tanner's eyes widened before they narrowed. Hawk watched in satisfaction as his smug grin melted into a thin-lipped, hard expression. The light in the boy's eyes reminded Hawk of the Feral Fever that had gripped so many aboard the space stations in the early 22nd century.

"We're in charge of this station. You, my dear *Commander*, are going to give us the security clearance we need to get into the weapons section, and then you are going to give your final authorization command for entryway into the station's center engines. Or we can do this the hard way."

Hawk frowned, pretending to mull it over, which only appeared to aggravate Tanner. Then he smiled, though he didn't let the smile touch his eyes. His fingers slipped over the blue 'emergency code' button on his chair handle and he pushed it twice. An alert would be sent to the director of Interplanetary Affairs. That was one good thing about unexpected hostile takeovers. Unless they were in the 'know' no one but the emergency responders and those high enough in the chain of command knew where the alert buttons were located. The alert would be sent throughout the station to essential areas and those who needed to know.

"And who might the new requisitioner of this station be that asks such a thing? I can't go about giving codes to just anybody." Hawk held his hands open in an all-encompassing way.

"It is of no consequence-" one of the men spoke up, but Tanner cut his hand through the air, effectively stopping the man's words. "You have the pleasure of addressing Colonel Nase Tanner of the Chaos Cult. You, *Commander,* may now address me as 'Sir'."

"I see," Hawk said without letting the smile fall from his face. One of the men in the back turned and began conversing with someone on the other end of his wicomli. No doubt being informed of the alert he'd just spread. He decided to make a dangerous gamble with his next words. "Well, since you put it that way, I'll have to say. No. Thanks for coming; you may see yourselves out."

Tanner's Martian-red tinted cheeks increased a shade.

"Sir, an alert's been sent throughout the station," said the man whom Tanner had originally interrupted.

"No matter," Tanner replied, eyes wide in outrage. "We are positioned in all the necessary areas. Clever, Albot, but useless." He gave Hawk a smug smile. "We will get what we need, and then we will let this station fall, crushing the ASD and effectively killing all the remaining

hybrids. And you, my dear former Commander, will be able to witness it first hand."

Hawk felt something sharp and pointed prick him just below the neckline. A calmer. He had thought Tanner too arrogant for such a tactic, but apparently those under him weren't. His mistake. Hawk only hoped the drug wore off in time for him to do something as he felt his desk and reporter beneath him and his consciousness began to slip.

* * *

Amberl watched, stunned, as Tanner turned on his men and berated them for taking away his 'fun.' It suddenly occurred to him that he'd lowered his disrupter gun. He holstered it and looked at Malch.

"You have plans to stop this." It wasn't a question. If it was an act, it was too staged. At that moment, he no longer cared whether hybrids were escaping off-moon. He was more concerned that word of this hadn't leaked out sooner, that such insurrection hadn't been stopped before it had gotten that far. So he was unprepared for the answer he received.

Malch muttered, "It goes too far up. Too far."

"Tonight those we could inform will go into hiding, deep beneath the surface. We've calculated all the possible trajectories for impact of the orbiting space station," said a hybrid with human skin tone. "Sympathizers will take as many as they can smuggle off-moon. We are going elsewhere."

Amberl jerked his head in the direction of the hybrid who had spoken. His face was impassive; so alien and yet so human. "What? Where are we going then?"

The hybrid's acorn eyes stared into the space behind him. "Far, far away. Where we will be safe."

Amberl shook his head in confusion, then looked at Malch. "Safe? How far up the chain does this go?"

Malch shrugged, looking away from him. "I don't know. As far as here."

"Certainly you don't suspect the solar governments to be involved?" Amberl asked, hearing the engines rev up as they began to pass through the moon's outer atmospheric edges. "We should head for Saturn. It's the closest…"

"We are not fools." One of the female hybrids spoke up, sea-blue eyes glaring at him from behind black hair. She could've been human except for her pale green skin. "We'll be killed on sight. How do you think society will take to us being suddenly reintroduced? Especially when… the rycions will shun us and the humans hate us." Anger and something else, hurt perhaps, seeped into her voice. "To you we are nothing more than abominations. Unnatural and soulless."

The male with the acorn eyes placed a hand on her shoulder. She relaxed her tense pose, but her cold sea-blue eyes still burned with fury. "They will soon need our help, Sajora. Remember, we are the Nahi. We must try to balance our righteousness with pity."

"Pity?" Amberl couldn't believe his ears, trying to wrap his mind around their strange attitude. But what had the hybrid been about to say?

One of the male hybrids stood from where he had taken a seat. "It's coming," he said in a tone so serious that everyone looked at him with grim countenances, all except Amberl who was busy trying to control his temper and think rationally.

"What-is-going-on?" He heard the exasperation slip into his voice.

For once no one volunteered any information.

Finally one of the female hybrids spoke up. "The invisible sun. It's coming." She looked up at him from where she sat and he finally remembered her as the distraught one at the door of the

murder scene. Invisible Sun? It began to fall into place. The murder. Dr. Howard. But it couldn't be. It was just a ridiculous theory.

"No, it's not nonsense, sir," Malch said, looking straight into Amberl's eyes. "And I'm afraid you're going to know first hand, soon. We are Darklighters." Amberl could only stare as Malch continued, "I worked with Dr. Howard for a few universal years before his disappearance. He went to Tamleck, but I haven't received any word from him in several Ilsha months. Manny confirmed what we had seen, and…well we'll all know way too soon."

Silence pervaded. The shuttle increased speed. From the viewers Amberl could see Ilsha and its planets becoming no bigger than a far away star. It felt good to be in space again, but his mind was in chaos trying to absorb everything. One of the hybrids began conversing on a wicomli.

"Can we track its path?.....Which ones are gone?.....The ones in the red sector are still good…." The hybrid switched to Tamleckian as another voice spoke through the wicomli. Amberl couldn't make out the words, only hear a burble of the voice.

"We should be able to get an updated trajectory if we merge the red and yellow sector information," the hybrid said aloud to the one who had originally activated the com screen.

The teal-skinned hybrid input information into the com screen and a representation of the solar system appeared. A massive object was shown slowly making its way through the Milky Way. Distant suns and planets began to be displaced by the object. Earth and Tamleck were not within its projected path, but their suns were. Amberl felt like he was watching a game of marbles in slow motion, unable to believe it was real. Maybe they were tricking him. Had they all gone insane? Amberl realized Malch was watching him.

He directed his gaze toward Malch. "Call whomever you want on your wicomli. We won't stop you. Once we get to the Dasher, you can do as you wish. Even try to summon up the galaxy patrol."

"It's started now and there's no stopping it. All we can do is sit and watch and try to salvage what's left when it passes," said the male hybrid with acorn eyes. "This is why we are the Nahi. This is why we exist. And this is why we must make compassion and pity our ruling emotions."

Amberl returned the hybrid's gaze. "Things are going to be very different now," the hybrid said. "New planets, new suns. We've done what we could, but it will take time."

Amberl glanced out the viewer as metal came into view, though a green haze seemed to surround the viewer. He realized for the first time that they were using 'accelerated speed' and another shock ran through his body. Never before had he experienced 'accelerated speed' without the need for strapping into chairs. He realized the hybrids must have re-vamped the shuttle with newer technology gleaned from rycions.

His stare continued out the viewer as more ships gleamed into view, their light illuminating them in the dead of space. All suns were distant stars. Unless he was mistaken there was a whole fleet, not only of human models, but rycion as well. Reality began to hit him, hard. He wanted to scream at the insanity of it all. He wanted to cry at the loss of everything he knew. Emotions flashed and roiled within him. Hate, anger, sorrow, disbelief. He felt like a shaken bottle of pop.

"We'll be docking shortly with the *Dasher*. You'll be free to talk with the captain then, sir," Malch said.

Amberl hardly heard him. The *Dasher* grew larger and melted away all view of the other ships. Warm, familiar, enhanced sunlight flooded the viewer from the artificial lights inside the docking area. He recognized Lieutenant-Captain Kerell from his time on the Orbiter Iris. He

stood issuing orders to the men assisting with the shuttle's arrival.

Amberl swept his gaze around the shuttle's interior, realizing that he'd now have to force away those old prejudices and that from now on things were going to be radically different. No matter how much he thought about it, it was unreal to him. On the com screen the planets and suns like moths swirled, the taw cutting a path through them.

The End

Fugitive Moments

By Jeff Wheeler

<Two Corian Cruisers intercepting our course. Mark eight. Mark seven. Mark six…>

"I see them," Darshee said, his fingers altering the coordinates and setting countermeasures while his eyes locked on the multiple dashboards. The bio-screens flashed in reds and golds, updating speed signatures and magnetic fluxes. "Ugly cruisers, but slow."

<It only takes one to figure out the shield algorithm, Darshee.>

"I know. I know. How many marks before they intercept?"

<Two. There are ten more approaching the event horizon.>

"Do you have the coordinates locked?"

<Of course I do.>

"Don't get testy, Austen."

<I'm a nav-computer. I don't get testy.>

"Have they figured out our shield algorithm yet? Boost speed."

<Has our power shut down yet? Obviously they have not.>

"Full thrusters then. Engage the seraphim coils."

<It's too early, Darshee.>

"I said engage them! You are a nav-computer. Obey!"

<Not when you're wrong. Mark minus one. Mark minus two.>

The bio-screen went livid with data pulses. The cruisers tried to jam the controls of the *Pemberly,* but the encrypted algorithm held them off. A thousand points of light instigated as weapons systems fired, but none of them would reach him in time. The pulsing lasers traveled at the speed of light. The *Pemberly*, now at full power, had reached Seraphim-phase Four.

<Coordinates locked. Byxlian galaxy passed. Qvar Eight galaxy passed. Norstar galaxy passed. Approaching Collier Time Loop. Really, Darshee, you should not have stolen it.>

"Since when do nav-computers have consciences?" Darshee said, squinting at the blizzard of galaxies swirling past the display. For an odd moment, he thought if he stuck out his tongue, they would gather there like snowflakes. "Power level draining. Any nova near the Collier Loop?"

<I would have told you if there were.>

"Prepare to jump the bridge."

<Already in progress, Darshee. Mark minus six. Mark minus seven.>

"Too slow!"

<Mark minus eight. Mark minus nine. Crossing Antipodes galaxy. We're in the Collier Loop.>

The *Pemberly* jolted, bucking like a fiendish colt, and then everything went as still as glass. There were no more stars. Of course, Darshee would not expect any inside the super-dense black hole dubbed the Collier Loop.

He smiled and ran his fingers across his sweaty scalp and hair. Easing back into his support cushions, he slowly let out his breath.

<You still shouldn't have stolen it, Darshee.>

"You're being a prude again, Austen. We're safe."

<True, the odds of any intelligent being finding us in the Loop is infinitesimally remote. In fact, the precise odds…>

"Are not even worth mentioning. We did it, Austen. The shield encryption was worth what I paid for it. And stealing the coordinates was not that difficult."

<You barely made it out of the Dome alive.>

He shrugged. "That's all in the past, Austen. All in the past. Calculate the next jump point. Find the most likely proximity."

<I'm already doing that.>

He leaned back, stretching, listening to the subtle melody floating through his mind. The cerebral chip had uploaded everything. The dress. The mannerisms. The vocabulary. All salient facts, information, suppositions, and variabilities. He knew what crumpets they ate, what tea they drank, the banalities of conversation from the era.

<Approaching the jump point, Darshee.>

"That was fast."

<Time doesn't exist right now. What else did you expect?>

"A little more respect from you, Austen. It was superb execution. Brilliant forethought and excruciatingly detailed planning. If I don't say so myself."

<Not to mention a trillion-credit shield encryption. A bargain, I'm sure.>

"Testy again, Austen. Prepare to jump."

<Already working on it, Darshee.>

* * *

Darshee exited the *Pemberly* and inhaled the crisp air. The lack of pollution thrilled him. His boots crumbled the reddish stone as he tested the gravity and degree of infrared and ultraviolet radiation on his arms. He adjusted his molecular structure, calibrating it to the carbon half-life of this world.

"It looks like Utah back on Earth except for the moons," he said with a sniff, staring at the ridge of rock formation forming a natural bridge. The twin moons of the planet were silhouetted behind the bridge, offering a peek at a verdant lunarscape that the original Earth setting lacked. Would that have altered the story's outcome? Or inspired it?

<Earth is still pretty, Darshee.>

"But this is earth, Austen. Circa 1810. Nearly two thousand years ago."

<It's a rather dull imitation.>

"Where else would I park the *Pemberly*, hmm? If I hovered over London, they would see it from Oslo."

<Paris, more likely.>

"Always a pessimist. No, there are no signs of life in this area and will not be for at least thirty years or so. I'll be bored by then."

<What about the tribe we saw when we landed. I think they were all a little frightened.>

"They're a superstitious, clan-based group of primitives. I'm not worried. Have you tested the cerebral net? We'll have contact from here to London?"

<Easily. You could be on Jupiter and my net would still reach you.>

"Excellent. I'll be off then."

<To Jupiter?>

"I didn't travel to another galaxy in another time to visit Jupiter."

<You are still wearing your gear, Darshee. You'd better change.>

"Do it as you transport me." Darshee took a step and found himself in a haze of grainy sand before he felt solid footing again. The earth was spongy with fresh grass and the smell of lavender and prissy weed. Instead of a bujold rifle on his shoulder, it was an object that looked like a walking cane. A tight cravat strangled him and a wide-brim top hat settled in his mass of curls. His waistcoat fit snug and he was still getting used to the high boots. Ahead two young man sat astride fiery thoroughbreds.

"I say, the view is lovely. Absolutely lovely. Surely you agree, Mister Darcy."

"I would agree to nothing of the sort. It's a humble cottage. You could do better, Mister Bingley."

"Hardly so, Darcy. Hardly so. Look at the line of the roof. It is in splendid condition. And so near to town, I can hardly picture a more worthy home. My dear sisters…"

"Will be bored to distraction with the local ladies and their silly past-times. I tell you, Bingley, that this is not the place for you."

"I highly concur," Darshee said with a perfect British accent. He did not smirk when both men startled and took a moment to settle their horses. Instead, he slapped his leather gloves against his palm. "Unless you seek to own a home that was inhabited by drunkards and knaves."

"Good sir, you startled us," Mister Bingley said. Darshee had not expected the large wart on his nose. "We did not hear you approach."

"Indeed we did not. If we spoke any offense…" the other answered.

Darshee waved him off with a frown. "No apologies required, my good sirs. If I comprehended your conversation, I understand that you are interested in leasing that property there."

"Indeed I was," said Mister Bingley. "I came here for that express purpose."

"Whilst I came here to discourage it," said the other man, Darcy.

"It is a charming house. Though I beg your forgiveness sirs, for I leased it myself earlier this morning. Here is the deed."

<You are such a snake, Darshee.>

Ignoring the disapproval in Austen's voice, Darshee extended the wad of papers he had stolen from another world. "No hard feelings, Mister Bingley?"

A stormy look crossed Bingley's face. "I say. What deplorable timing. If I had ridden up a day earlier, as I had planned. This morning, you say? Zukes! Well, I shan't confess that I am *not* disappointed. Strange that the attorney would have sold it…"

"A canny coincidence, for sure," said Darcy. "Let's bid this gentleman goodbye and return to your sisters in London."

"In all haste. Might I have the pleasure of making your acquaintance?" He tipped his hat.

"My name is Darshee. Will Darshee."

As the two young men cantered off on their mounts, Darshee's face quirked into a smile.

<You know I don't like it when you get that look in your eye.>

"Yes, Austen. I know you hate it." He took off his hat and stared at the fabric and seams. How long had he been plotting this exploration? A hundred years? Two hundred?

The first step had just executed brilliantly. And if his and Austen's calculations were correct, Elizabeth Bennett would be at home with her sisters just a few miles away.

* * *

In a way, Darshee realized, the seeds of his pursuit of Elizabeth Bennett were planted back in the year 2005, when Israeli physicist Amos Ori predicted that the nature of universe itself could—and probably already *had*—created a time machine. That titanic gravitational forces could warp the space-time continuum and create a loop where history was replayed over and over again. After the barrier to light speed was surpassed and zooming across the universe became fashionable for the super wealthy, adventurers started the quest to find a gravitational field with the right signature. It was discovered and dubbed the Collier Loop.

"That was when the universe got interesting," Darshee said, sipping his tea and watching the horizon from the looming windows of his new estate.

<You say interesting, but you mean greedy.>

"You're being cynical."

<You're being selfish.>

"Admittedly. And why not?" He brushed crumbs from his lap. "It was the moment of great revelation. Einstein never fathomed it. Carl Jung glimpsed it but could not articulate it coherently. He described it as the 'collective unconscious.' It was a pivotal moment for every world in every universe for all infinity ad nauseam."

A maid entered with a fresh plate of tarts. She had that haunted look that meant she dreaded coming into his presence. He didn't care in the least. The entire household staff believed him to be insane. He had no intention of disabusing it.

"Imagine it Austen. This girl, written about as an extra in a scene. But here she is, alive. Not a book story, but a real being."

<It disturbs them when you talk to me, Darshee. You know they can't hear me.>

"Precisely so. Adds a new dimension to the old clinical schizophrenia, doesn't it?" The maid was slinking away. "No, I didn't dismiss you yet. It's the genius of it all, don't you realize. You…a maid…what's your name again?"

"Molly, sir."

"Molly. Any reference to Molly in *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen?"

<Of course not. But you've already altered the book now, haven't you?>

"That doesn't matter! The point is that the *book* is real. The character, the setting, it is real. Somehow, Jane Austen's imagination from our world was nothing but a gateway within the Collier Loop to this world. Something has bound all of our minds and all of our thoughts together. There truly is no original story. They have all played out across the universes, throughout time, and certain lucky souls manage to tap into them and articulate them in some given way. The magnitude of this discovery was beyond comprehension. Which is why they guard the location of the Loop so closely. Why all coordinates to the universes are carefully catalogued in the Dome."

"Would my master…master like more crumpets? Shall I fetch them?" The maid was positively trembling with fear.

"More crumpets. Yes. More please. And more tea. Thank you, Molly."

The maid tripped over herself leaving.

<You are cruel.>

"I'm eccentric, Austen. They are not the same thing. "

<Whatever helps you sleep at night.>

"How much longer until the ball?"

<Several hours still. You're giddy.>

"And why shouldn't I be? I am about to meet one of the most famous characters in all literature. Hundreds of billions of people have read about Elizabeth Bennett from *Pride and Prejudice*. I actually get to meet her."

<As if *meeting* her would satisfy your ambition. Please, Darshee, let's be frank.>

Darshee did feel dizzy with excitement. He started pacing the chamber, hands clasped behind his back. He went to a mirror and practiced scowling again.

<The real Darcy was very handsome. More brooding.>

"Phlegmatic, too, don't forget." He sized himself up, wondering how he would be able to stand the wait.

<Why *Pride and Prejudice*, Darshee? Every book by every author who ever lived. Why Jane Austen?>

But how does one exactly describe falling in love with a character in a book to a computer?

* * *

"A splendid party! And such fine specimens for any gentleman to dance with. Would you not agree, Mister…?"

"Darshee."

"Mister Darshee. A man of your station will have no difficulties making acquaintances here. Might I beg favor of you to do introductions? Over there are the Lucases? Are they not a comely bunch?"

"No, sir. I am here by invitation and arrived as requested. I care little for such gatherings."

<Look at his scowl. You've offended him, Darshee. You play the role of arrogant bachelor well.>

Darshee continued to stroll the studied, counting quickly. There was the Bennett family, in plain site. Jane, sweet-natured and mild. Mary, as plain, and seemed to be sucking on some foul-tasting thing due to her sour expression. Kitty and Lydia were the youngest and lurching around for gossip. But where was *Lizzy*?

The dancing had already begun, and Darshee made it a point to be aloof, egotistical. His heart raged inside his chest as he looked from face to face for the girl he longed for. And there she was, talking to her friend Charlotte. He stopped, breath catching in his throat. By all the fair fields of England in any universe, she was beautiful.

There was a shortage of men. He knew that would be the case already. He had read the book. Elizabeth was chatting in a friendly tone, her face animated yet secretive. The look in her eyes, the storm howling furiously inside his soul. All of the data he had embedded into the chip fled at the sight of her. She turned suddenly, as if chilled by a breeze and looking for the source of it, and saw him.

He approached, closing the distance between them.

"Pretty," he said, sizing her up. "But you smile too much."

"Is that the opinion of all, or just yours?"

"It is my opinion. Why aren't you dancing, Miss…?"

"Miss Bennett. As you can see, sir, we are wanting more able men than we have. Might you conjure a friend or two to satisfy the dearth?"

"My conjuring skills are lacking, but I can conjure you a partner, if you are agreeable."

"I detest dancing unless I am particularly acquainted with my partner. Shall I make your acquaintance first? Mister…?"

"Darshee. By all means. If…"

"I shall fetch something to drink," said Charlotte, curtsying to Darshee. He bowed, as expected, and she nimbly fled the scene.

Elizabeth cocked her head. "You purchased Netherfield, Mister Darshee? Where do you hail from?"

"The Pemberly."

"Is that a town?"

"No. It is a ship."

"You are a sailor then? A captain?"

"You could safely say that I am. Have you sailed before, Miss Bennett?"

"I don't even ride horses. And what brings you here? There are no ports. Not for miles."

"You."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I came looking for you, Miss Bennett."

<Don't overplay your hand, Darshee. You'll frighten the girl.>

An intriguing smile played over her mouth. "Indeed. And how far has this journey brought you?"

"Over fourteen million galaxies and nearly two thousand years."

There, it was out. The truth. Only the truth. It was a constraint he had given himself at the beginning. Masquerading in primitive England would have been enjoyable, but impossible to maintain for months or years. Truth was his best weapon. He would woo her on his terms or not at all.

She was quiet, her eyes reflecting the color of storm clouds. Her white teeth dimpled her lower lip. "A great distance, sir," she said at last.

"Do you believe me, Miss Bennett?"

"I do, Mister Darshee. Truly, I do." She took his hand in hers.

<Darshee, my net has been compromised! Systems are powering down!>

Alarm. Pure, unadulterated panic. His mind scrambled. "Bring me back, Austen. They found us."

<Systems overridden. Power locked. Coordinates jammed. Darshee!>

The network failed. In his mind, he felt a gap wider than a continent chasm between them.

The grip on his hand tightened. "Don't make a scene, Darshee," Miss Bennett said, her eyes locking into his. "Follow me to the dance where we can speak according to the plot. Your ship has been disabled."

She wasn't Elizabeth Bennett.

The disappointment was crushing. Never in his life had he felt so close to tears. For a moment, nothing came to his mind. Nothing. He followed, pulled by the hand as if by a tether.

All around, the players assembled for the dance. The famous first dance. The network buzzed again in his ear. "My name is Catherine Moretti, Dome Security."

Of course.

"How did you find me?" he asked hoarsely. *Austen? Are you on-line?*

"I've read the book. Have you enjoyed your moments in this era, Mister Darshee?"

They began to dance, hands and arms forming a cats cradle above their heads.

"Shorter than I was expecting. Where is she?"

"A little unwell this evening. You're not going to flee again are you?"

"Should I?" They changed directions, rotating hips, and went the other way, preparing for the looping part of the dance.

"I know why you came here, Darshee. It might be interesting catching you again."

"Let's finish the dance first, Catherine."

The End

Birds of a Feather

By O. R Savage

Ruins!

Talar scanned them, his insides struggling just above revulsion. Odd that trails of smoke still wafted along the horizon. The hot air stung his nostrils with the stench of decay-tinged ozone. He considered putting his helmet back on. Instead he dropped it, unhooking his pack and letting it fall as well. He took his weapon and canteen, slinging the latter over his shoulder and looked up. The tri-arch here was a good landmark. He glanced behind him at the desert rolling into haze beneath looming moons that orbited so close as to nearly touch. Orbiting each other well inside Roche's limit, something kept them from dissolving—some power Echion's forces must have used to advantage in opening a portal here.

None of the other Primoids knew he had returned to this utter desolation. It might be some time before they realized he had left them. They were so busy trying to pick up the pieces—the pieces his failure had broken things into and he couldn't face them—especially Varn Mestre.

He closed his eyes, focusing one of his Primoid powers to search for life free of distraction from the common universe of four dimensions. He scanned about him in visual darkness but seeing along seven more dimensions what others could not. Life of any sort would appear within his closed eyes as a *radiance* of color that had no name. But any hope he might of had quickly disappeared: all was dark. No life—no hope of life anymore. Echion's *Valkyrie* had destroyed all of the trillions of living things that had thrived here in her quest for the Treasure—the Treasure Echion's military now possessed; the Treasure Echion would use to pervert other life to his own hideous purposes. Talar swallowed hard. All was surely lost, certainly for him.

He moved down the hill into distorted crumples of glassteel and adamantium. The streets looked as though they might have run molten. Shadows of white ash charred fragmentary walls–*shadows* of people frozen in as if in mid-flight when the *Valkyrie's* solar arches had probed the city.

Talar saw no bones, just ankle-deep dust kicked up by his footsteps.

The sun drifted its gradual, westward course as he wandered deeper into the city. He passed a clump of metal that still smoldered: a planetary defense turret. Even ruined, the slow decay of its power cells heated the surrounding debris to incandescence and would for centuries to come.

He paused to take a drink of water. The moons had long since set and a touch of cool air breathed in from the north. Talar closed his eyes again, searching . . . hoping.

Nothing. There was nothing of the color that had no name.

Wait. There it was: a faint glimmer of life. He opened his eyes to search out its direction in the visual world, verifying its direction again and again by closing and opening his eyes until he was confident. He started out toward it with anxious urgency.

It proved farther away than he had suspected--kilometers farther. Hours and more kilometers later he saw the sun touch the horizon—blood red from the dust and debris of planetary war churned up into the stratosphere where jet streams kept too much of it aloft.

He tapped on his shoulder strobes. They bathed the nasty labyrinth of darkening ruins tens of meters ahead as he climbed across them.

Walking let in time to think, flooding his mind with guilt-ridden thoughts of the Treasure. It was not unlike a near involuntary tongue pushed into going over a mouth sore again and again when no good could come of it.

The lost Treasure haunted him. Despite every effort to avoid it the loss of the Treasure—*his* loss of the Treasure tormented both waking and sleeping moments; sometimes just barely below the surface as now and others remote, but *always* there, within him. Over and over its image and attendant emotions came back to him—brilliant green, it was—glorious—heart-wrenching—sometimes seeming a fountain—the Fount (he and the other Primoids had named it)—but other times a the father of all trees bearing a fruit white and radiant and delicious beyond all experience. The Fount had been given to him for safe keeping while the other Primoids sought for ways to protect it and the other fourteen Treasures given them by the Creator for purposes known fully only to Him. The Treasures were original *sources*—gifts and powers He had given them—*them*, the Primoids--here since the beginning of all things. The world now in ruin around him had been deemed strong enough to withstand any attack—more than strong enough to protect this most precious of the Treasures should Echion try an assault as he had so unsuccessfully in the past.

And when his new portal had opened between the two moons a lone woman had emerged from its coherent blue vortex—a *Valkyrie* who had unleashed storms and powers never before seen among the thousands of planets already languishing beneath Echion's Third Empire. She had poured out the solar arches and every weapon leveled against her failed even to touch her. But what was worse for Talar, none of his Primoid abilities had been able to keep her from taking the Fount. This world had died because of it and he had lost that which was most precious to that which was most evil! His guilt again proved unbearable.

No one had faulted him. No one had said anything. He was the youngest of them. Perhaps that had saved him from open censure, or worse. Since the fall Talar had spent many nights awake, living and reliving the awful event that would surely echo and reecho across time—his time, at least. What could he do? What could *any* of them do? And then the smallest glimmer of something stirred inside.

What if something of the trillions of creatures once living here *had* survived that slaughter—something he and the other Primoids had missed upon first surveying the damage? The possibility had gnawed at him until finally, alone, Talar had slipped away and come back to see. There could be no peace for him ever again. Of that he was sure. But he *had* to look—perhaps find *some* shadow of redemption, even if only a sliver of a shadow.

He pressed forward beneath the descending night for a time then stopped, closing his eyes to take his bearings on the life-light.

He was close enough now to see that its glimmer was human—almost. Something wasn't right. He thought his Primoid weapon to *on*. Its light glowed dull silver. He turned off his shoulder strobes and crept forward.

The woman sat atop a knoll of ruin. She wore a loose caftan that fluttered in the night breeze. Her hair was dark frizzy and hid her face as she watched the horizon, tinged with orange through dull yellow to deepening blue. The stars had come out, the galaxy stretching across the heavens in a glistening diadem—fuzzy, overflowing with stars too dense to count.

For a fleeting moment he wondered if the woman were alive. She just sat there—utterly silent and still. He crept closer and she turned her face to him.

It was she—Echion's *Valkyrie* who had stepped from between the moons to decimate a planet and claim the Fount! His paralyzing sorrow gave way to a seething rage. His weapon flashed white—sun white. This time he would be sure! Talar leapt at her, taking her in a rolling jumble off the knoll. They landed finally with him on top, his weapon glaring in his hand, she squinting along the barrel. He nearly pulled the trigger but hesitated. She was doing nothing to resist—she who had razed cities and forests and boiled away seas.

"Please," she said softly. "I am helpless." He did a quick scan of the dark nubs of metal blistering her arms. It seemed their awful glories *were* gone.

"Can you get off me?"

He climbed off, exercising incredible self-control, his brilliant weapon trained unerringly at her head. She sat up, shoulders hunched. "You can put that away. I *am* helpless."

"Not just yet," Talar said.

"You—*you* are the Primoid."

Talar remained silent. She squinted beneath the weapon's brilliance. "You are." She looked away. "I do not blame you for attacking." She looked back. "Have you come for revenge? How did you know I was here?"

"Tear your sleeves off. I want to be able to see your arms."

She obeyed without hesitation. "Is this good enough?"

Talar nodded, watching her carefully.

"I am Ku. I am—I *was* a Stormer."

"Stormer? Is that what they call you?" Talar frowned.

She nodded. "We're invincible. Echion was saving me—us for a special mission."

"There's more than one of you?"

She nodded again.

"So, where's the Fount?"

"The Treasure? Beyond your reach, I fear."

"Why should I believe you?"

She shrugged.

"How can I get it back?"

"Echion himself must have it by now."

"HOW CAN I GET IT BACK? YOU MUST KNOW A WAY!"

"You can't. If you couldn't stop *me* from taking it you surely can't get it back now. He is *surrounded* by Stormers and *they* are surrounded by a personal guard of a hundred thousand. And you cannot reach them until you have vanquished the billions of regulars he keeps stationed on the focus world. All are surely alerted, now, for any sort of attempt to reclaim the Treasure."

They regarded each other uneasily. Rage swelled up within Talar again. "Now you tell me why I shouldn't destroy you."

She shook her head slowly, "Because you are a Primoid. War is one thing. Murder is another. You Primoids live by strict laws. This I know."

The brilliance of Talar's weapon flickered. She was right. This *was* different, and vengeance *did* belong to Another. He let out a sigh too long held.

"I *am* sorry," she said when the weapon's glare finally dwindled to its earlier, dull silver. "See? Your gun knows. It will not let you fire, now. That is the weakness of your power. Nothing you Primoids build is amoral."

Twilight's darkness enveloped them.

"So you *did not* know I was here," she said finally, standing still while the gown of her caftan fluttering audibly. "What are you doing then?"

"I came back to try to find survivors—someone your *genocide* might have missed."

Ku winced visibly. She closed her eyes. "Echion demands thoroughness. I fear you will find no one. I am sorry."

"Sorry?" Talar's rage kicked in again, darkening his weapon completely. Angry at it he yanked it away it. "I can't believe . . ."

"I am in exile," she interrupted over him.

"What? Why?" he said after a moment.

"Do you have any light? I do not like the darkness."

Talar tapped on his shoulder strobes, but set them dimmer than before.

"Thank you. Can we sit?"

"Go ahead. Keep your arms where I can see them, please, and no quick motions."

"You persist. I do not blame you. Look—" her hesitation seemed a request for his name.

"Talar," he said.

"Look, Talar, can you not see I am helpless, now? Look at this planet! Were I empowered I could have destroyed you when you first jumped me. I tell you I am helpless, now."

"I ask again, why?"

She smiled wryly. "I made the unforgivable mistake of developing a conscience."

Talar shook his head after a moment. "I don't believe you."

"It is true, God help me."

"What changed you?"

She shook her head. "I do not know. Perhaps wielding so much power." She laughed once. "If power truly corrupts beyond caring, then how is it my ruining this world sickened me to the point of horror?"

Talar took a deep breath. This was all so bizarre. How could he believe her? There could be treachery. He closed his eyes and quickly scanned the horizon. It was devoid of any life. He looked heavenward. The galaxy was rich with it but remote, as he had always seen it.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Nothing," he opened his eyes, looking at her as if for the first time.

"Oh."

An uneasy pause ensued.

"I guess you have to return to the other Primoids?"

"I'm in no hurry for that," he said coldly. "I'm sure I won't be missed, anyway—not after this."

She nodded. "So we are *both* in exile?"

"In a way."

They waited silent, under the stars. The breeze flicked cold gusts of occasionally spattering sand. Ku wrapped her arms about her, huddling—shivering. Talar saw it out of the corner of his eye but did nothing.

"I am immortal, you know," she said after more minutes of silence. "It is Echion's only power left to me. He said he wanted me to think about my treachery for the rest of time." She looked down. "I cannot kill myself here. I am immortal but not invincible. My body

continuously regenerates itself. Still, pump enough energy at me fast enough and . . .” She looked up at him—at his weapon. “Pity your gun will not work.”

Talar said nothing.

“What about you?”

“Much the same,” he nodded. “I get to have nearly an eternity to think about how marvelously well I’ve messed things up, here.

“Look, I’ve got to go.” He stood up. Without a single word more he turned and headed back into the darkness.

He expected to hear her come after him or call to him or something, but no. He moved on, rage stirring him again—rage at this Stormer; rage at the other Primoids; rage at the Creator . . . but most of all a black, seething rage at himself. He picked up his pace, moving away faster—as fast as he could, stumbling at times, getting up and moving on.

“You can’t escape from yourself,” he muttered after a while. “*Why* can’t you get away from yourself?” He gritted his teeth, clenching his eyes shut. “Why isn’t there *some* way!?

“Would that I never was,” he whispered not for the first time. “So many people gone—so much life . . . and the Fount.”

The stars drifted gradually overhead, the air chilled to cold. From the east the first glow of moonrise blistered the gnarled horizon. Talar did not see its sterile beauty; did not care any more—*could* not care any more.

He couldn’t get away fast enough, and the time dragged on and on.

The larger of the moons crested, casting an eerie, pale blue across the world. He finally reached the edge of the ruins. The tri-arch lay not far ahead. He hurried to it—dark, resolute. Picking up his helmet and pack, he looked up. “Maybe I can’t get away from myself,” he whispered. “But I can see to it I never fail the Primoids again.” He lifted his hand toward the sky and watched the answering descent of his Ship of Light dropping gradually from orbit. It circled and landed in silence and utterly dark. Talar half laughed at that: a Ship of Light so uncharacteristically dark. “Figures,” he said, walking over to it. “Well you’ll still take me where I need to go,” he added quietly. The canopy opened along with his personal ordnance bay located just behind the second seat. He dropped his gear inside, sealed it then turned to look far west.

Intergalactic space claimed half the sky. Mere smudges, dim and unimpressive, punctuated the utter black—galaxies millions of light years distant. “Too close,” he squinted. “Still too close. But I’ve got time to go beyond *anyone’s* reach.”

He kicked at the dirt then turned back toward the city. A sudden impulse to check on Ku’s location fluttered past him. He shook it off and climbed inside the cockpit. He tried to fire the engines using the Mestrate telepathic instruments but there was no response. Cursing he opened the manual overrides and powered up the engines that way. They whined for a minute then fell silent. Slowly, carefully, he lifted off, soaring star ward in a gradual arc.

The limb of the world fell away, its moons shining baleful beyond the horizon.

“Let’s get out of here,” he muttered wryly, powering the White Drive impellers.

“No more failures,” he added . . . then stopped. He frowned, scowling at the beginnings of a conflict roiling uncomfortably inside him.

“This is insane,” he said finally, quietly. “I won’t do it!” His hand hovered above the White Drive initiator. “How can I?” He looked up. “My God, how can I?”

Reluctantly he turned the ship about, facing the planet, eyes closed—searching for the color that had no name. It took a little time but he found her: Ku, a single point, barely visible along seven dimensions. Her life radiance seemed as a star, almost, dim, even twinkling down among the ruins of a stilled city whose life-colors must have rivaled the glory of a galaxy’s

visible light in happier days. There was only darkness, now, and just she. Talar shook his head, opening his eyes. After another bout with doubt he reconciled her life-color position with that of the *visible* world, then started back.

He had no thoughts—barely any feeling, only old, old impulses too deeply ingrained into the warp and woof of who he was. The ship fell smoothly to a hover just beyond where Ku stood, silhouetted against the great moons. He jerked his head in an invitation. She paused a moment, then came slowly. Talar said nothing as she climbed into the seat behind his. He closed the canopy and lifted toward space again.

"Birds of a feather," he said finally to her. His hand moved to the White Drive initiator. There was no hesitation now. The Ship of Light, dark, functioning only on manual, leapt deep into intergalactic void.

The End

The Bridge of the Malefactor

By Peter Dahl

The corridor before him was a place of secrets.

It was a place bearing witness to the whispered mysteries of the occupants before him. And it was entirely a chill space, smelling of sweat and rancid cheese, suffocating him when he let it. He held an emaciated hand before his eyes, a silhouette with which to shield his eyes against the small box of intense sunlight the single-barred window in the centre of the passageway cast onto the stone floor. If he glanced too closely at the window, it made his eyes sting.

This was the Bridge of the Malefactor, and he had stared relentlessly down its length for an eternity. At least, more time than he cared for. The only connection to the outside world was the tiny window in the middle of the bridge, no doubt designed as a cruelty to demoralise those held within, for the light very quickly became too bright to look upon, and the noise from the outside world became a torture. Gulls called, the breeze stirred, the river bubbled, and people argued, laughed, sang, or cried beyond that portal, and he could hear it all.

He knew the bridge before he became interned. It led away from the prison tower on a small island in the middle of the great river Almir. Despite understanding its purpose, he nonetheless had imagined it entirely differently. Of course, he had only ever seen its exterior, sumptuous as it was, with curved spires and intricate mosaic tiling. This was the bridge of the last journey—the *'Bridge of Last Sigh'* as it was popularly called—the final sigh before execution. Given the choice, he would have liked another way, not because he was scared of death, but because he longed for a different one.

There was no longer any alternative.

Today he would traverse its length, confront one final time the light of the world he had been forced to leave behind. Raw nails bit into his weary skin, his hands becoming fists, reminding him of life, simply because he could yet cause himself to feel pain. Yes, there was no other alternative.

Ironic that it was a choice that had brought him here.

'You make choices like they are a right, like you know what to do with them. And then all you find is that your own choices lead you to a place where there can be no more. There is no return to a day when that freedom is yours.'

His laughter was stark within the confines of his solitude. It nearly caused him to wretch, a parched throat triggering spasmodic misery as his body heaved. The skeleton he had become hurt to the marrow. Retreating from the iron lattice in the top of the prison door, he slumped

against its studded timber and faced his black cell. "But—so be it, and damn them."

'Bold talk—damn them indeed!'

"Oh, be quiet." He used to like the conversation when he was more certain there was some way out of his predicament. When there was need to keep his mind sharp. Now it was merely goading and self deprecating. "Please, it's enough."

The voice of his intellect could not hide its triumph. He was hurting. *'Can you remember them?'*

There was no need to close his eyes to see them.

He could picture the world he had cast himself out of, without effort, as if he were still there, almost as though he could reach out and fight again to change what had become. He saw the dust on the streets and alleys of Feddah, the sun alive in a myriad of molten metal colours, glossing age-worn cobblestones with the most delicate golden hues. Murky cinnamon, like an overgrown bog, the river Almir wove its way through the buildings steeped against its powerful lines. The palms on its banks were tall and alive, leaves yellow and clove, and the bitter green of the wet season. The furled sails on the masts of anchored ships seemed to be bursting to catch the wind and glide over the water. A tear wet his eyes.

What had he done?

The day he had found his grail stood firmly in view, overpowering the loved images of his home. It was the day he destroyed his life and damaged those of his people; all for a look at the mysteries of an ancient king.

And again he was there, in a world not his own, the dust of time on him, covering his hands, filling his nostrils as he climbed the last verge to the cave. No human should have ever ventured here into the lands of the immortal.

Above and about him arched the bare walls of a tunnel so old it might have been used by God himself. A vaulted formation of twisted stone standing in a crazed design of nature's devising, and with all the plasticity a glass-blower might breathe into viscous sculpting. The ceiling of the cave had long collapsed and crumbled to sand and pebble, probably even before any sentient life had ever set foot within. Now, thin creepers and weeds made a patchy carpet, eking out existence with the scant moisture that collected under these ribs of the earth, breaking what was left of the rock that once formed the dome. In the light of day's end, the stone trusses took on the colour of the desert around it—russet, ochre, and amber clay, and the reds and oranges of terracotta pottery. And all was enfolded by the brilliance of the purpling sky, and the accompanying diamantine moons, rising but not yet full.

This place must have been a true wonder, today it was a whisper of old glory.

'You shouldn't have seen the place of the two moons.'

He had not given them much thought at the time, never mind that they were unsettling. Now, with unwanted remorse rising up in his guts like so much bile, he knew there had been a cost. "No—I shouldn't."

'But you—you had to go on. Your pride has opened up the world of mortals to the fickle ravages and cold indifference of the spirits.'

"I pay the price for it soon."

'Who already paid the price for you, Zathisal?'

Feddah lay like a lover below him. He saw it again with too much clarity, and reluctantly conceded this was a befitting punishment, to relive the past one more time before he met his due.

"Sir, what is it?"

Prince Zathisal wrenched his gaze away from the town below the walls and stared at his sergeant. The flat helm on his head wore the dints of battle like some royal pageantry. His face

was streaked with the dirt of bloodshed. A heavy hand rested on the hilt of his devastating blade.

"Look upon the town." Zathisal turned back, the grip on his own sword full of righteousness. "Do you see the colours, Erabin?"

Perhaps the sergeant thought his captain had gone mad. He did not reply immediately. "Looks like Feddah on any autumn day, Lord, the crooked rooves pointed and shimmering, the mud-brick and sandstone walls painted bright, and the merchant signs gilt—but there's battle, Lord. May be yet more dire colour spilt ere the day's done."

Somewhere there chortled thrush-song, sweet and playful.

Then the horns blazed. The first arrows hummed overhead, soon a hail so thick the very air was made of wood and steel and feather. Sounds swam together in a cacophony to shatter the heart, arrows whistling, breaking on stone embattlements and painted shields, flesh and bone breaking under impact of the unleashed darts, voices breaking in the strain of deadly pain. And then the large missiles crashed the crenulations of the town defences, the bombardiers finally brought close enough to wreak their miserable artistry. Noises of human devastation smashed his ears with a rape of stone and wood exploding, and the deranged cackle of consuming fire.

Erabin fell to the pavement of his home, adding his colour to those of many slain. Zathisal could not forget the stunned shock in the man's face as he toppled. The tears in the prince's sore eyes would never fade the vision.

What have I done?

The Sergeant was a good man, with family.

'Aren't they all?'

No. Not all. With a start, Zathisal was back within the darkness of the bridge. *Not everyone*. That single thought was all he could cling to. All his choices were based on the one idea—*not all men are good*. He would not loose that truth. For there was one man he remembered so above all, a man as black as a pit, and out of the bitterness of his mind came the likeness, deceitful and cold.

Before the Prince sat a wizened old fellow; the robes covering his modesty were grey and black, stitched with silver symbols not many living could still read, lore that guarded the keeper of arcane secrets. Belying his age, his hair was ebony, like polished jet, and thick as brush. His eyes were wicked chips of dark quartz, hinting at a bloodline not wholly human.

He was the council.

And whether ensorcelled or no, his stare held the lightning of a mountain storm and sucked Zathisal like he was honeycomb.

"You say you are a friend?" said the council, spider-like on his carved chair of marble, the multifaceted gemstones in his coronet like so many arachnid eyes. His voice was thin but sharp. "And yet you have disobeyed me? Sought out the girl?"

"No…" strength rushed back to Zathisal, his blood coursing with hot anger.

"Do not speak!"

A quick blow of a haft to the back of his legs nearly brought him to his knees, the prince feeling the soft breathing of the guards tickling the hair on his nape, an itch he could not scratch. His vision rocked a little.

"Explorer, are you? No. I think you're nothing but a fish-chasing peasant." The council's visage leered murder at him. His bloodcurdling eyes rested on Zathisal as if he was a feast, and in the flickering torchlight, the silver-threaded characters of his garments shone with sudden power. "You seamen are like all the whale blubber-smelling leeches of your land, a mere trifle that exists beneath the glory—me."

"Long have the men of Feddah been allowed to exist by the grace of the High Kings. But

they think they are still their own fiefdom, led by your boat-building father, who calls himself *King of the Waves*. Time for a lesson, I say. Teach them what they have not learned after all this time of worship, respect for the High Kings and their Council Okulus."

A shudder ran through Zathisal. The midnight of his cell swirled inky around him. From outside, somewhere near the bridge, he heard the call of a horn. The timbre of a human voice amplified by bone and metal momentarily warmed him, snatching him from the ordeal in the decaying throne room. It was the call of the midday watch.

The call fed him with its melliferous music, and he could not help but remember his love, the reason for his stubborn pursuits in a forbidden land.

'You failed her.' His mind's voice was not mocking, carrying a gentleness that was more devastating than any derision would have been. *'She's dead.'*

"I tried to leave her." In his tears swam their first meeting.

A warm summer breeze played with her hair. It was the colour of chestnuts, long, flowing to her waist, two braids collecting it together at the small of her back. She looked startled to see him in the courtyard, her walnut-brown eyes widening, revealing her glistening spirit within. She sat on the rim of a pool. Water splashed from the oversized horn of a statue of the Hunter, carved of white stone, pattering in a relentless croon of gentleness. Sunlight emblazoned her as if she were the ancient god's very daughter, brightening her simple green dress.

If only he had not come to that yard.

'Would it have made any difference?' For the first time there was a note of sympathy in his mind. *'You were trapped by your curiosity of the arcane in any event. It may have found the same outcome?'*

Prince Zathisal conceded this to himself. The High Kings, or rather, Okulus, had used him. They had merely waited patiently for a mortal to bridge the gap and re-unite the spirit realms with those of men. They knew one day a man would find a way—would find their banished kingdom. Once the die had been cast there was going to be war one way or another, despite the pacts, despite the long history of worship between human and immortal. The High Kings were meant to be in charge—it was a self-decreed destiny, the fickle whim of immortals.

But he could not help wonder, why him? Why his love, Bethanie?

"Do you often come here to gaze at the water?" he had asked her on their second meeting, Zathisal stealing himself away to the courtyard, hoping to see her again.

"It reminds me of..." Bethanie flicked errant strands from her face and smiled, her cheeks like powder snow he had once seen on a mountain. It was so different from the olives and browns of his people. "But you know the answer already."

He laughed, far too self-consciously, and sat next to her. "I merely want to be certain I will see you again."

"You shouldn't. My father will ask too high a price—you are mortal."

"Ah, but I have to." His hand went to his heart. "I have no choice now that I have spoken to you."

"Forgive me," she said with a glint in her eyes. "But you are very sure of yourself. What if I don't wish to see you?"

Again he laughed. True to rumour, she was proud and spirited. Here was a woman after his heart; her frankness did not disturb his impression of her. Much like his boyhood stories had portrayed an immortal lady should be. Zathisal put on his best grin. "I've still no choice in the matter, fair damsel. My heart's stricken."

'Foolishness—there was always a choice!'

Again the melody of a horn call penetrated his cell. It carried with it the freedom of his

heritage, the freedom of the world under sail, and it tore his insides with longing to ride the sea one more time. This was a familiar sound, one that all mariners of Feddah lived with every day. The notes carried truth he had not wanted to articulate. He could have steered away, not chosen to seek out his love in that courtyard, cementing her doom. It might have spared her.

'Yes. You might have done that.'

Zathisal broke to the inevitable conclusion. "She would yet live. Her immortality would not have been sacrificed otherwise."

'Perhaps. This life will not let you know.'

"It is the reason, isn't it? They had to find a reason to go to war."

'Did they have to kill her? You had done enough already for there to be war—you opened the gateway. You made one of them into a concubine.'

The clang of a metal lock invaded his brooding, as if punctuating his last damning conclusion. Footfalls echoed down the hall, and he knew his captors were coming to his cell for the final time. Every pace measured the shortening of his life, and yet he was glad for it.

"Prince Zathisal, by royal order, today is your execution day," projected a voice over the rattle of keys on his door. "Are you ready?"

'You've been ready ever since she died.'

"I'm ready."

The door opened and he was blinded by brand-light, making him wince. Strong hands gripped him, pulling him out on uneasy legs. They did not thrust him onwards. To his surprise, the guards let him steady himself. It seemed they would give him his dignity on this day. He was once one of them after all; a seaman that swept over the waters beyond the mouth of the great river Almir.

"As is tradition on this bridge," one of the wardens said, "you will be allowed to look at the view from the bridge, stopping like so many before you to breathe your last sigh and look out onto the world that banished you. Cry your essence into the waters of the Almir if you will, for you will receive no rite, you will not be released into the sea as is done for those who die in honour. Your soul has no home."

The prince could not move.

What if immortals had no soul? He had been tricked into losing her, and now he was not sure his redemption would let him find her again in the after world. He cast doubt aside. He would use his damned stubbornness one last time.

'It's flagitious, isn't it? A masterful web of deceit.'

The warden intruded on Zathisal's dark thoughts. "Come, my Prince, the window awaits you."

Zathisal forced movement. He wanted to cry, to pour himself into the river that should take his soul away. So he strode towards the window and kept his feet even when the light seared his pupils, and he blinked so ferociously he did not know whether his eyes were open or closed. But soon his outstretched hand touched metal and he found it.

It might have been a month or a minute, but when he finally managed to see through his blurred pain, his breath was stolen away. Before him, the country was awash with colour and life, though it was late in the autumn, and though the destitution of a war ravaged land was plain. People lined the banks of the river, and when they beheld his face at the window, the air trembled with a cheer of multitude, and the Bridge of the Malefactor shook with it.

'And yet the fools love you.'

"It's not enough."

'Yes.' The cheers ebbed and flowed like crashing beach waves cascading onto sand, and

his mind's voice stopped momentarily, considering. The crowd did not stop. *'But it's why you are loved. You die, Zathisal—they live.'*

The prince was surprised. He could not believe these people had come to celebrate him. Was he not the reason so many of them had died in war? Was it not him that had lost a generation of young men in battle? The land around Feddah was defeated, fields trampled and burned, buildings pulled down and collapsed, the town itself smashed and broken. Zathisal could still see smoke rising from the ruins of the battlements and the homes, the granaries and temples. He was not worthy.

"They have lost everything."

'The country is still theirs, and they homage the one who returns it to them.'

"That?"

Still the crowd of people shouted and waved, and men blew horns. Soon the river itself filled with people. Boats bobbed on the water, their passengers and crews all staring up at the window and calling to their prince. Over the ruckus, Zathisal heard his heart beat.

But the shouts filled him and took him to another loud place, one which he did not want to return to. It was a final memory, flashing like an epiphany.

Around him was blood. The same colour as that of his sergeant, Erabin. About him were splintered weapons and the hacked bodies of beast and man and immortal. Arrows stood up like weeds, sticking up out of sand and much fouler dirt. The field before the main gate of Feddah reeked of things that a man should not ever smell. But there he was, and the noise of battle roared. And the movement of death swept waves of harvest.

For Zathisal, the moment was frozen.

He found himself before the council, Okulus. The user of the arcane had premonition in his stare.

"How?" said the wizard eventually, a hint of fear in his voice. "You have conquered an army you had no right to."

Zathisal's grip on his weapon was slipping, the hilt slick. "Is it important?"

"I need to know it."

"You do already. It's your only weakness."

Okulus scowled in thought. "I do not have the hearts of those who fight?"

The prince nodded. "Your men are not with you, as much as you tease, trick and torture them. Something I learned about the love of a people. Although I plunge my country into war, its people would always rally to a favoured son. It is, have no doubt, because I will pay a price."

"I don't understand."

"Why should men fight?"

"I will it."

"That's so, but how much harder do they fight if you asked it? What if you led the way, and did not command them into the vanguard to give up immortality? What if you gave yourself to the task you demand?"

Okulus sneered. His body stiffened and he lifted his arms to the sky, grubby fingernails long and twisting. The silver symbols stitched on his robe glittered with potence and his eyes flashed. "Come now, let's end this."

No longer though did Zathisal feel this man's power suck him like he was food.

"Zathisal! Zathisal!" the people cried his name, and their prince came back to life on the bridge above them. *"Zathisal!"* His name became a chant against which he raised his arm. He did not want this. They had no right and should be silent.

'Have it your way—but they might yet save you from the gallows.'

"I don't want to be saved."

'Perhaps that's the only reason your father continues the charade. What is your crime? Why are you to die?

"Treason."

'You know that's not it! It is a peace offering only.' Zathisal lowered his arm, letting his mind's voice drown out the crowd. *'Saving the face of the High Kings—you didn't start this war.'*

"But I end it. Okulus is no more. I killed him. It is the law that now drives my fate—I ignored it when I followed my heart. Bethanie's family still wants a justice."

'No dear friend. That's not why, for they could accept the truth of Okulus' deception. It was he who empowered you to find their realm under the two moons. It was he who killed the immortal girl you loved. It was he who allowed you to escape and return here, all the while following with an army. I'm certain of it. But you still want…' His mind's voice paused, silence ringing in his head, asking the question without need for more useless words.

His pride still ruled him.

"Love." Zathisal wept as he gave the answer. He could no longer help it.

The End